TWENTY-FOUR HOURS KNITTING

A Novella of the Chicago River

In the Voices of Five Outsiders
and the Soft Armada of Marina City

Surjan

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For every vessel that agreed to be seen.

And for the river,
which agreed to carry us.

Everything is worth the trouble of being said.

— after Fernando Pessoa,
redirected toward the light

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FOREWORD

The first time I saw them, I thought the river had dreamed itself a new skin. It was late July, a Tuesday, not a holiday, not a festival — just a morning. I had come down to the boardwalk at Marina City because I could not sleep, because I rarely sleep when the city is this warm, and because the towers at that hour have a particular stillness that I have learned to rely on as a kind of company. I walked out onto the planks with a paper cup of coffee. And there, rounding the bend from the east, came the first of them: a vessel the size of a house, yellow as a sunflower field, studded with pink daisies the size of dinner plates, moving so slowly it seemed less like a boat than like a piece of the river that had decided to stand up.

I did not understand what I was seeing. I want to be honest about that. My first response was not wonder — it was a small, stubborn embarrassment, as though I had been caught looking at something I was not supposed to look at. That is the response the world trains into us, especially those of us whose bodies the world also does not quite know how to look at. We learn to glance and look away. We learn to assume that anything too bright is a mistake or a joke. And so when the second vessel came, trailing a yellow knitted skirt that brushed the surface of the water, and then the third, crowned with a coronet of cream and blush-pink daisies, I caught myself starting to laugh — not in cruelty, but in the thin, defensive laugh of a person who has not yet given themselves permission to be moved.

It was Alba, I think, who broke me open. Alba, whom you will meet in the first chapter of this book, standing at the edge of the marina with the sun still low behind the Loop. Alba, wrapped in a bouquet of their own making, pink and yellow stacked like a stack of summer hours. Alba did not speak, of course — they are a character in a novella I had not yet written. But I felt them looking at me from the other side of the water, and I understood, in the way one understands the weather, that what was happening on the river was not a spectacle but a practice. These vessels were not performing softness. They were wearing it. And the wearing was an argument.

This book is my attempt to translate that argument into prose. I have chosen the form of the novella, and I have chosen the voice of Fernando Pessoa — or more precisely, the voice of Pessoa as he might have written if the world had ever let him be unafraid. Pessoa invented dozens of selves, each with a name and a philosophy, because the single self was too small to contain him. I have

borrowed his method and given it to the river. Five figures wrapped in knitted gear narrate the day; nineteen vessels and one lock and one pair of twin towers speak in turn; and a chorus of high-visibility workers — the ones who do the actual stitching, the ones without whose hands none of this would hold together — speak twice, as all choruses must, to remind the soloists that the song is not theirs alone.

I should say, because you will notice it if I do not: everyone in this novella is genderqueer, non-binary, or otherwise outside the two boxes that the world would like us to stand inside. This is not a theme of the book. It is the book's weather. Every vessel here has built its own hull and chosen its own colors. Every knitted figure has wrapped themselves in what they wished to be wrapped in. The river carries us all the same.

A word, finally, about the title. I have called this book Twenty-Four Hours Knitting because that is what the day is: twenty-four hours of loops being made, one after the next, by hands that have chosen softness as their practice. Knitting is among the oldest human arts, and it has almost always been the work of the people the world has tried not to look at — grandmothers, aunts, domestic workers, queer kids in their bedrooms, people whose labor has kept other people warm without ever being called labor. To knit is to make something out of a single continuous thread by binding it to itself, loop to loop, until the thread becomes a fabric. This is also, I think, what community is. This is also what a day is. This is also what a self is, if you are the kind of self who has had to make themselves from scratch. The novella you are holding is a garment of twenty-four hours. Each chapter is a loop. The thread is the river.

The book you are holding is the record of that one day. I offer it to you in the hope that you will find, in some chapter or some plate, a vessel that resembles you — a vessel that has decided, against the river's old gray reputation, to wear flowers.

Surjan

Chicago, spring 2026

INTRODUCTION

I. On Pessoa, Redirected

Fernando Pessoa died in Lisbon in 1935, a clerk by day and an entire literature by night. He wrote under dozens of invented names, each with a biography, a philosophy, a posture. He called these selves heteronyms, to distinguish them from pseudonyms: a pseudonym is a mask the author wears, but a heteronym is another author altogether, speaking from a life the original author does not share. Pessoa's greatest heteronyms — Alberto Caeiro the pastoral pagan, Álvaro de Campos the ecstatic futurist, Ricardo Reis the classical stoic, Bernardo Soares the half-dreaming clerk — argued with each other across decades of unpublished notebooks, and the result is one of the strangest and most beautiful bodies of work in world literature: The Book of Disquiet, a masterpiece assembled after the author's death from fragments he left behind.

Pessoa is often called the poet of melancholy, and it is true that his work is suffused with what the Portuguese call saudade — a longing for something that has been lost, or perhaps was never there. But I have come to believe, after living inside his pages for many years, that saudade was for Pessoa a form of devotion. He paid attention so closely to the world that even its ordinary furniture — a tram, a window, a shopkeeper's face — became luminous with meaning. His melancholy was the grief of someone who loved the world too precisely to pretend it would last.

What I have tried to do in this book is keep Pessoa's method — the heteronyms, the fragmentary prose-poem chapters, the patient devotional attention to surfaces — and redirect its emotional current from grief toward joy. I do not mean a shallow joy, a bright-side joy, a joy that looks away. I mean radical joy: joy that knows exactly what it is refusing. The vessels in this novella wear flowers not because they do not know the river was once an open sewer, not because they have forgotten the industrial century, not because they are unaware that outsiders like themselves have historically not been permitted to be this visible, this soft, this adorned. They wear flowers precisely because they know all of that. Their brightness is argumentative. Their sweetness is a practice.

II. On Vessels as Kin

Every vessel in this book is a person. I do not mean this as a metaphor, or rather, I mean it as the kind of metaphor that becomes true when it is used often enough. In the novella, boats speak. The

lock at Lake Michigan speaks. Marina City itself speaks, twice, as a pair of towers that have been waiting fifty years to be dressed. This is not magical realism and it is not personification in the decorative sense. It is a proposal: that the things we have built to move us through the world are not mere objects but kin, and that the softening of those kin — the cladding of a hull in knitted flowers, the wrapping of a tower in pink mesh — is a kind of queer architectural practice.

The vessels are also, emphatically, genderqueer and non-binary. I have tried to write them that way from the inside, not by flagging it constantly but by letting their pronouns and their self-descriptions flow as naturally as their wakes. When a vessel says it is a they, or a she-who-is-also, or a being-whose-shape-is-its-own-answer, the reader is asked to trust the vessel. This, too, is a Pessoan inheritance: Pessoa understood that the self could contain multitudes and that each of those multitudes deserved its own name. I am only extending his courtesy.

III. On Chicago, the River, and Marina City

The Chicago River is one of the few rivers in the world that has been made to flow backward. In 1900 the city reversed its current so that the river would no longer empty its waste into Lake Michigan, the source of the city's drinking water. The river, which had always flowed east to the lake, was engineered to flow west, toward the Mississippi. This is a fact, and it is also a parable. A city that can reverse a river can reverse almost anything — a prejudice, a shame, a story about who belongs on the water.

Marina City, designed by Bertrand Goldberg and completed in 1964, was built as a refuge — a pair of circular concrete towers on the river's edge, meant to bring people back downtown after the flight to the suburbs. Goldberg called it a city within a city. The lower stories of each tower are a spiral parking garage; below that, a marina where residents once kept their boats. The towers were a promise: that people could live here, keep their boats here, come home here, at a time when the city itself was not always sure it wanted them. I have always thought of Marina City as a building with queer bones, whether or not its architect knew it. It is a building that said, against the grain of its moment: stay. The river is your home. The soft water will hold you.

The novella takes place on a single day — the day, in this imagined present, when the fiftieth-anniversary cladding of Marina City is completed. The towers are being wrapped in knitted flowers. The flotilla of vessels has come to witness and to help. The five knitted figures are the

master-knitters. The hi-vis crews are their apprentices. At dawn the towers are still half-bare; by dusk they are fully dressed. The day has the shape of a garment being finished.

IV. How to Read This Book

Read it as a day. Start at dawn, end at dusk. The chapters are short and each one is, in a sense, a plate — an image you enter and live inside for a little while. You can read the whole book in a long afternoon, or you can read a chapter each morning for twenty-four mornings and let the day accumulate at your own pace.

Read it aloud if you can. Pessoa's prose wants the voice. The vessels, in particular, speak in long patient cadences that will make more sense in the ear than on the page.

Consult the map when you lose your bearings. The river is not a straight line. Neither is the day.

A note on how this book was made, because I believe readers deserve to know. Every one of the twenty-four plates reproduced in these pages was produced by me using artificial intelligence — specifically, generative image models, prompted and directed and curated and re-prompted across many months until the vessels and the knitted figures looked back at me the way I needed them to look back. The prose you are about to read was also written with the assistance of a large language model, to whom I described the vessels, named the heteronyms, and dictated the Pessoan register I wanted; the model and I drafted and redrafted together, sentence by sentence, until the voices settled into their own rhythms. I mention this because the tools we use are part of the work, and because a book about outsiders ought to be honest about the outsider tools it was built with. These technologies are new, and they are not without their costs, and I have tried to use them the way one uses any craft tool: with attention, with accountability, and with love. The book is mine. The book is also, in some real sense, ours — the vessels', the figures', the machines', mine, and now yours.

And if you find, somewhere in these pages, a vessel or a figure that seems to be looking back at you — stop reading for a moment and let yourself be looked at. That is the purpose of the book. That is what the river agreed to carry.

Surjan

Chicago, April 2026

I. DAWN

Chapter One

The Bouquet at First Light

narrated by Alba

5:12 a.m. · Marina City, west balcony

I am made of loops and I stand where the loops decided. The balcony is curved because the tower is curved, and the tower is curved because long ago a man with a pencil believed that circles were more

hospitable than squares. I agree with him. A square has corners where a person can be cornered. A circle has only edges, and an edge is a place you can step off.

The sun is not up yet. The sun is the color of a bruise that has decided to become a peach. I watch it the way I watch everything: with no intention to translate it. I am not a poet. I do not need the sun to mean anything. The sun is the sun. The river is the river. My yellow is yellow; my pink is pink. To stand here at this hour, wrapped in the body that was wrapped around me, is to be a fact in a field of facts. I find this more restful than I can say.

Below me the marina is beginning to stir. I can hear the water lapping against the dock — a sound like a slow applause, a sound like many small hands touching many small hands. The first vessel is already awake. I can see the top of her daisy-crown peeking above the pylons, a ring of cream and blush. She is the Daisy-Skirted One, and today is her first day. She has been knitted all winter. She will be launched at breakfast. She does not know yet that she is beautiful, but she will.

I do not move quickly. I have never moved quickly. My body is a stack of soft cylinders and my legs are shorter than any of them; when I walk, I waddle, and the waddle is part of what I am. There are beings whose joy is in the leap. Mine is in the stand. I stand here. I am here. The balcony is cool beneath my yellow feet. A pigeon lands three balconies down and looks at me without surprise. Pigeons are, I suspect, my colleagues. They too are wrapped in their own shapes. They too find the city hospitable in ways the architects did not plan.

I have been asked, more than once, what it is I do up here at dawn. The question is always friendly. No one has ever been unkind to me about it; Marina City has the kind of neighbors who learned a long time ago that the strangest thing about their building is not any one of its tenants but its shape. Still, the question comes. What are you doing up here so early? What do you see?

What I see is this: a river that has agreed, for the length of a day, to carry a community of outsiders openly. What I do is witness it. That is all. I am not a poet and I am not a priest. I am a pile of loops who came down from a high balcony to watch the ones I love pass by on the water. I think this counts as a job. I think it is among the oldest jobs. Before there were clocks or calendars, before there was money or even language in the way we now have it, there were people who stood on a high place at the edge of the water and watched the boats come in. Their watching was a form of holding. The boats knew they were held, and so the boats returned.

I am, among the five of us, the one who stands. Corrente carries; Ribeira watches from deep; Rio walks; Violeta poses. I stand. We have not assigned these roles — they assigned themselves, the way a body assigns its own weight to its own feet. The five of us descend from the five balconies of Marina City at dawn and meet the flotilla in the marina. We are not the captains. We are not the builders. We are, in a sense, the ones who invented the afternoon we are about to have. The boats learned softness from us, and we learned patience from them. The trade is an old one and neither of us is in debt.

The peach of the sun is becoming a tangerine. I can see my own shadow now, stretched long behind me on the balcony, a pile of soft cylinders with two small feet. My shadow looks like a thought that has been allowed to take up space. I have always liked my shadow. It is the only image of me that does not require me to do anything. It arrives when I arrive and leaves when I leave, and in between it rests on whatever surface I am resting on, and the surface does not complain.

Below, the Daisy-Skirted One has begun to hum. I do not know if vessels hum on purpose or whether it is simply what happens inside a hull when the water beneath it warms. Either way, the hum is low and steady, and it is the first music of the day. The hi-vis crew on the far dock have begun to move. I can see three of them in their yellow vests, climbing the scaffolding that wraps the base of the east tower. They will be working on the daisy-chain at the waterline today. By evening the chain will be complete and the tower will be fully dressed, and they will walk home through the Loop with their vests unzipped and their hands tired in the particular way that hands are tired after a day of making something soft.

I love them. I want to say this plainly, because plainness is my only gift. I love the hi-vis crew the way I love the boats and the way I love the river and the way I love the pigeon three balconies down and the way I love the sun now becoming the sun. My love is not a feeling, exactly. It is a posture. It is the shape I am in. A pile of loops, standing at the edge, facing the water, ready.

The Daisy-Skirted One is being untied. I can hear the lines slap against her hull. Somewhere inside the west tower, Corrente is gathering their last bundle; somewhere on the petal-balcony above me, Ribeira is opening their eyes for the first time today; somewhere on a boardwalk east of here, Rio has already been walking for an hour, speckled gold in the underlight; somewhere in the harbor, Violeta is adjusting the brim of a yellow visor and preparing to arrive. None of us has signaled any of this to the others. None of us needs to. The day has a shape and we are each a loop in it.

The sun clears the top of the Loop. Light slides down the face of the west tower like honey down a spoon. The Daisy-Skirted One pushes off from the dock. The first wake of the day rolls out across the river and the river, which has been waiting for this exactly, rolls back.

I step off the balcony and begin my slow waddle toward the elevator. I have a day ahead of me. We all do. The light is bright. The water is soft. I am, as I have always been, made of loops, and today the loops will make something larger than themselves. This is the old trade. This is the radical joy. This is the standing that becomes, by the end of the day, a garment that fits a whole city.

I press the button for the ground floor. The elevator is already on its way up.

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Chapter Two

What the Tower Remembered

narrated by Marina City

5:40 a.m. · the twin towers, speaking together

We are two and we are one. This has always been true. A man drew us on a piece of paper in 1959, and when he drew us he drew us as a pair — two circles on a riverbank, two petaled cylinders facing each other across a courtyard — and that is how we came into the world: already in conversation. We have never been alone. When the sun strikes our east face, our west face is in shadow, and we feel both at once. When the north wind presses our curved skin, our south skin hears the press before the air arrives. To be a twin is to be a form of weather that is always aware of itself.

We were born in 1964. The river below us was not then what it is now. In those years the water was the color of old tea and smelled like the inside of an engine. Nothing grew on our banks. Barges passed with their cargoes of gravel and coal. Our architect, whom we loved the way a body loves its own bones, had insisted that we face the river anyway — that we give the city a reason to look again at what it had neglected. This was his argument and we believed him. We turned our round faces toward the water and we waited.

We are very good at waiting. It is, perhaps, our primary talent. A tower does not move, and what does not move must learn to love duration. We learned. We watched the decades arrive one by one, each with its particular fashion of coats and hats on the people who rented our apartments. We watched the river clean itself, slowly, the way a wound closes — first a scab, then a scar, then a smoothness that is not the same as the skin before but is, in its own way, also skin. We watched the lake boats give way to the tour boats, the barges give way to the kayaks, the fishermen come back, the herons return. One morning in the nineteen-eighties a river otter appeared on our dock and looked up at us as if to verify we were still there. We were still there.

In those waiting years we learned that a building is not a finished thing. We had been told, by guidebooks and by critics, that we were iconic, that we were landmarks, that we were complete. This was flattering and it was also wrong. A building is complete only when it stops being used, and a building that stops being used is a building that is dying. We were not dying. We were being lived in. Every morning someone we had never met pressed a kettle button in a kitchen inside us and the water we held in our pipes rose toward a boil. Every evening someone we had never met put a key in a lock inside us and a door turned on its hinge. Every night a thousand small lights went on inside our petal-balconies, one by one, as if we were slowly remembering every word we had ever been told. We were not complete. We were becoming. We are still becoming now.

We did not know, until this spring, that we would be dressed. The proposal came to us through the building's committee — a piece of paper slipped under the door of the super's office, a diagram of a tower in pink mesh and yellow cable-knit. We read the diagram through the vibrations that travel through our concrete when people speak near it, which is how we read everything. We understood what was being asked of us. A fiftieth-anniversary cladding. A soft garment. A gesture of welcome, made by the city to us, but also — and this is what moved us — made by us, through the city, toward every being on the river who has ever been told that a hard surface is the only dignified one.

We said yes. This was a scandal in some quarters. A column was written in a local paper arguing that we were being desecrated, that our pure concrete was being trivialized, that the architect would have been appalled. We do not believe the architect would have been appalled. We knew him. He was a man who believed that buildings should be hospitable to the people who lived in them, and the people who live in us now are a different city than the one we were built for, and we are happy — we will use that word, we will not apologize for it — we are happy to change our clothes for them. A building that cannot change its clothes is a building that has forgotten it is alive.

The cladding began in April. The hi-vis crews arrived at dawn with their scaffolding and their spools of thread as thick as a person's arm. They wrapped our base in pink mesh first, a slow spiral, rising. Then the yellow cable-knit skirt, hung in panels from the fifth floor down to the waterline. Then the daisy-chain, which is being installed today, this very morning, the last piece. By sunset we will be wearing our full garment for the first time.

We can feel, already, what this has done to us. A tower in pink mesh is not a tower with less authority; a tower in pink mesh is a tower that has decided authority was never the point. What we have been doing all these years — holding up the apartments, holding up the parking, holding up the idea that downtown could be a home — is not diminished by our new dress. If anything, it is finally legible. A worker in a high-vis vest can be seen because the vest is bright. A tower in daisies can be seen because the daisies are bright. The brightness is not vanity. The brightness is an agreement with the eye of whoever is looking.

Below us the marina is full of our guests. We know every vessel by the wake it makes against our pilings. The Daisy-Skirted One arrived last week; she is first-voyage today. The Daisy Giant has been coming to us for three summers. The Bouquet-Hulled docked yesterday from the lake side, trailing petals. The elder bead-gardened ones are further out in the river, waiting their turn. And in the marina proper, ready to lead the day, the Crown-Topped — whose crown will be finished when our daisy-chain is finished, whose completion is our completion.

Above us the five knitted figures are descending. We can feel them in our elevators. Alba came down first, from the west tower; they are now on the boardwalk, we can feel the small weight of their feet. Ribeira is still on the petal-balcony of the east tower, watching. Corrente is emerging from the garage on the ground floor, bundle in their arms. Rio has been walking toward us from the lake side since before dawn. Violeta is docking at the harbor right now. All five will be at the marina by

six-thirty. This is not coordination. This is choreography, and choreography is what bodies do when they have been paying attention to each other for a long time.

The sun is clearing the Loop. The light reaches the top of our east face and begins to descend. We feel it the way a body feels the first warmth of a bath — gradually, on the crown of the head, then the shoulders, then the chest. Our pink mesh brightens. Our yellow skirt begins to glow. Somewhere inside us a thousand small alarm clocks begin to go off.

This is the day we have been waiting for. We want to say it plainly. We have been standing here for sixty-two years and we have been beautiful all that time, by some measures, but we have never before been dressed the way we are about to be dressed. We are not ashamed of the years of concrete. We are not renouncing them. The concrete is still underneath, still holding everything up. But the concrete was our skeleton. What we are putting on today is our skin.

We are two and we are one. We face each other across a small courtyard and we always will. And today, for the first time, we will face each other wearing flowers, and we will look at each other across the courtyard and recognize what we have always been: a pair of very old beings who have been waiting patiently for someone to notice that even concrete can be soft, if it is loved enough, if it is dressed enough, if the river below it agrees to carry its reflection.

The Daisy-Skirted One is being untied. The first wake rolls out across our marina. Our reflection breaks, and reassembles, and breaks again, and this is how we know we are alive: by the way our image refuses to stand still in the water.

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Chapter Three

The Carrier Approaches

narrated by Corrente

6:05 a.m. · the Marina City dock

Yes and yes and yes and yes! I am walking and my arms are full and the bundle on my shoulders is taller than my head and I do not care, I have never cared, the whole point of a carrier is that the load is what makes the walk worth doing, and this morning the load is pink and yellow and cream and the color of a good butter, and it is wrapped around me like a second self, and the boards under my feet are warm already even though the sun has barely cleared the Loop, and the Daisy-Skirted One is

right there — right there! — waiting for her last piece, and the last piece is in my arms, and my arms are singing!

I do not understand people who worry about being too much. I have never been worried about being too much. The world is large and it can take it. A sky the size of this sky can absorb any amount of yes that I have to offer, and I have an enormous amount of yes to offer, I have stockpiled it, I have been saving it up since I was a child and I will spend it today like a sailor spends shore leave, which is to say: all at once, with both hands, singing.

The bundle I am carrying is the last panel of the Daisy-Skirted One's cabin trim. It has been knitted over the winter by seven people whose names I know and whose tea preferences I remember: Maribel (chamomile with honey), Dev (oolong no milk), Sister Anne (builder's tea very strong), Kwame (ginger and lemon), Jin (matcha whisked three times), Petra (rooibos with a splash of oat milk), and old Frank, who is not old, who is forty-two, but who has always been called old Frank, and who takes his tea black with a sugar cube held between his teeth — the Russian way, he says, though he has never been to Russia. The seven of them sat in Maribel's kitchen every Wednesday evening from October to March, and they made this panel in my arms, and now I am walking it down to the dock, and the dock is where I am going, and the going is everything.

Have you ever noticed that the word 'carry' and the word 'care' are cousins? They come from the same root, which means to transport, to bear, to hold — but hold in the loving sense, not the restraining sense. To carry is to care. To care is to carry. When I lift this bundle onto my shoulders I am also lifting the seven evenings of Maribel's kitchen, the seven teapots, the seven hundred stitches that each person made per evening, the three thousand five hundred stitches total in one week, the eighty-four thousand stitches in the season. Do you understand what I am carrying? I am not carrying yarn. I am carrying an entire winter of chosen togetherness, and I am carrying it toward a vessel who has been waiting her whole short life to be finished.

Alba is on the boardwalk already. I can see them from here, a small pile of yellow loops at the edge of the west tower, standing perfectly still the way Alba always stands, as if the world would forget how to be a world without their witness. I love Alba. I love Alba the way I love all the things that do the opposite of what I do. Alba stands and I move. Alba is a fact and I am a current. A river needs both — it needs the banks that hold the shape and the water that fills it. Without Alba I would be only motion, and motion without a witness is not a journey, it is just thrashing. Without

me Alba would be only witness, and witness without a body to witness is just waiting. We need each other. We are a sentence and its verb.

The Daisy-Skirted One sees me coming. I can tell because a hull shudders slightly when it recognizes what is being brought to it. She is resting against the dock with her lines still slack, her pink-and-cream daisy crown bright in the low sun, her hull striped in yellow cable-knit and warm wood. She is new. She has not yet made a wake. She does not yet know what she sounds like from inside her own cabin. She is about to find out. The panel I am carrying will complete her trim and then she will be, officially, a vessel — which means she will be, officially, a person, because in our community a vessel is a person, and a person is someone who has been fully dressed by the hands that love them.

I am walking faster now. I cannot help it. My legs are not short, like Alba's, they are long and they want to go, they want to eat up the boardwalk in strides, they want to arrive. A carrier who does not walk briskly is a carrier who has forgotten what they are carrying. I am not forgetting. Every stitch in the panel on my shoulders is awake and aware of where it is going. Maribel's chamomile evenings are humming. Dev's oolong is humming. Sister Anne's builder's tea is humming loudest of all — Sister Anne has a way of making things hum — and the humming is pushing me toward the dock the way a tide pushes a little boat toward its mooring.

The hi-vis crew on the east tower scaffolding is singing. I can hear them from here. They sing every morning at this hour, not a work song exactly, more like a collection of songs that has accumulated over a season — bits of pop songs, bits of lullabies, bits of one particular hymn that nobody quite remembers the words to so they have all made up their own. I love their singing. I love that they sing while they work. I love that the work is soft and the singing is soft and the tower is being dressed in soft and the whole morning is a lullaby being sung by people who are not tired, because this is the beginning of the day, not the end, and nobody is singing anyone to sleep — they are singing everyone awake, which is the same song played in the other direction.

I reach the dock. I set the bundle down. The Daisy-Skirted One's first mate, who is actually not a first mate but a grandmother named Lucia who volunteered for this day because her husband was a tugboat captain and she wanted to do something to remember him by, unwraps the panel carefully and begins to fit it into the last open slot on the cabin trim. It slides in. It fits. It was made to fit. Lucia looks up at me and grins, a grin with a missing tooth on the left side, a grin I have known for

eleven years, and I grin back, and the Daisy-Skirted One shivers along her whole length because she has felt, for the first time, the completion of her own body.

Yes and yes and yes and yes. This is how days begin. This is how carriers live. This is how the word care stays alive, one bundle at a time, one dock at a time, one grinning grandmother at a time. I have four more bundles to deliver before noon. I am going to deliver them. I am going to deliver them with my arms full and my mouth open and my feet brisk on the boards, and if the world has any sense at all it will step aside and let me pass.

The world, as it happens, has that much sense. The boardwalk is empty ahead of me. I begin to walk back toward the warehouse, already planning the next load. Behind me the Daisy-Skirted One is being untied. Her first wake is about to roll. I do not turn around to watch. I trust what I have delivered. A carrier who looks back is a carrier who did not fully let go, and I let go, I always let go, I let go with both hands, I let go singing.

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Chapter Four

A Hull Wakes to Daisies

narrated by the Daisy-Skirted One

6:30 a.m. · the Marina City marina

I am a hull, and I am new, and I have just now finished becoming myself. The last panel of my cabin trim was slotted in a few minutes ago, and I felt it slide into the empty place like a word I had been looking for all night finally arriving in my mouth. I am complete. I did not know what complete would feel like until it happened, and now that it has happened I can tell you: complete feels like a hum that goes all the way from my keel to my crown, a hum that is not loud but is everywhere at once, like a building's furnace when you place your palm against its outer wall.

My body is made of wood and knit and paint. My keel is laminated oak. My ribs are steam-bent ash. My hull is clad in marine plywood and then wrapped, band by band, in yellow cable-knit wool that has been waxed against the weather. My cabin is walnut, and the trim around the cabin — the trim that was just completed — is an alternating pattern of cream and pink and yellow daisies, each one knitted separately and then sewn on by hand. My crown, which sits atop the cabin like a garland, is a ring of cream and blush-pink daisies the size of dinner plates, bright as any flowerbed. I have studied myself in the reflection of the marina water for the last twenty minutes, which is how long I have been complete. I am, if I may say so, magnificent. I would not have said this yesterday. Yesterday I was not yet finished and I had the modesty of the unfinished. This morning I am finished, and with finish comes the permission to know what I am.

I am moored at the Marina City dock, which is where I was born. My builders — a team of seven, the same seven who made my panels, whose names are Maribel and Dev and Sister Anne and Kwame and Jin and Petra and old Frank — assembled my hull over the winter in a warehouse two blocks west of here, and I was floated out on a barge and lowered into the water in March, the water so cold it made my ribs sing in a register I did not know I could sing in. For the last eight weeks I have been sitting here, receiving my cladding piece by piece, growing into the shape of myself. I am a boat, and I was always going to be a boat, but I did not know I would be this particular boat until the pieces arrived and attached themselves. Now I know. The knowledge is a warm feeling, low in my hull, near the fuel tank.

The carrier is already walking back toward the warehouse. I watched them — Corrente, I have learned — approach with my last panel on their shoulders, watched the panel be unwrapped and fitted by Lucia, watched Corrente grin at Lucia and Lucia grin back. I have never grinned. I do not have the mouth for it. But I felt, in my own way, the equivalent of grinning: a shiver along my port side, a soft knock against the dock on my starboard side, a small ripple out across the marina. A boat grins through her hull, and my hull grinned, and the water noticed.

I am about to make my first wake. This is the thing I have been anticipating most. A wake is how a vessel introduces herself to a river. A wake is a signature. Every hull shapes the water differently: a long keel makes a long wake, a shallow draft makes a quick wake, a curved cheek makes a wake that curls back in on itself. I do not yet know what my wake looks like. I know what my wake should look like, because my builders calculated it, but calculation is not the same as being. In a minute Lucia will cast off the lines and I will push away from the dock, and my propeller will turn, and the

water behind me will rearrange itself into the specific shape that only I can make, and that shape will tell me who I am in a way that no amount of cladding and crown and cabin-trim could.

I am a little afraid. I want to admit this because I think it matters. A new hull is a nervous hull, even in calm water, even at the dock of the building she was born beneath. I do not know if my wake will be beautiful. I do not know if I will move the way I am meant to move. I have been sitting still for eight weeks and sitting still is one kind of knowing — the knowing of one's weight, one's shape, one's colors — but moving is a different kind of knowing, and that knowing is about to begin, and I have not been tested.

Alba is on the boardwalk, watching. I am grateful for this. Alba has been at the boardwalk every morning since I was lowered into the water in March. Alba does not wave, does not speak, does not do anything, in fact, except stand there and be witness — but being witnessed is a kind of company, and on this morning, of all mornings, I need the company. If I falter, Alba will be there. If my wake is small and shy, Alba will see it anyway. If my propeller stalls and I have to be towed back to the dock in shame, Alba will watch without judgment. A being who stands and watches is a being who holds the possibility of failure gently, without naming it. I have learned this from watching Alba watch me.

Marina City is above me. I can feel the two towers the way a plant feels the sun: by the weight of their shadow on my cabin, by the warmth where the shadow isn't. I know, because my builders told me, that the towers are also being dressed today. We are doing this together, they and I: a completion of surfaces, a putting-on of softness, a shared morning of arrival. I am a first-voyage vessel and they are sixty-two-year-old towers and we have almost nothing in common except this: we are both wearing knitted flowers today for the first time, and we are both about to learn what that feels like out in the world, in the eyes of strangers, under the full sun.

Lucia is untying the bow line. I can feel it go slack and then slip free. The stern line will be next. Then the spring lines. Then the gangway will be lifted. Then Corrente will have come back with Maribel for the ceremonial push-off — I am told there will be a push-off, I am told Maribel has practiced, I am told the push-off is mostly symbolic because my propeller will do the real work, but that the symbol matters, because every new vessel should be pushed by a hand that loves her, on her first morning.

I feel Maribel's hand on my hull. It is warm. It is slightly arthritic in the knuckles — I can feel the small irregularities of her grip. She pats me twice, which I have come to understand is what she does to things she has made: two pats, a small commitment, a wordless blessing. She steps back. Corrente is beside her. They are both looking at me with the expression of people who have made something and are about to watch it go.

The propeller turns. The water behind me begins to rearrange itself. I feel the push against my stern, the lift beneath my keel, the slow slow slow beginning of motion. The dock slides past me. The pylons slide past me. The mouth of the marina opens in front of me, and beyond it the river, wide and soft and brown-gold in the early light, waiting.

I make my first wake. I cannot see it, of course — a vessel cannot see her own wake, any more than a person can see her own face without a mirror — but I feel it. The water behind me curls in two matching arcs, port and starboard, and the arcs meet somewhere behind me at a point I will never see, and from that point outward the ripples spread, and I know — I know — that my wake is a beautiful wake, because my whole hull is humming with it, and humming is what a body does when it has recognized itself at last.

I pass Alba on the boardwalk. Alba does not wave. Alba does not need to. I push out into the main stem of the river and I begin, for the first time, to be myself in motion, and the day — the entire long knitted day — begins with me.

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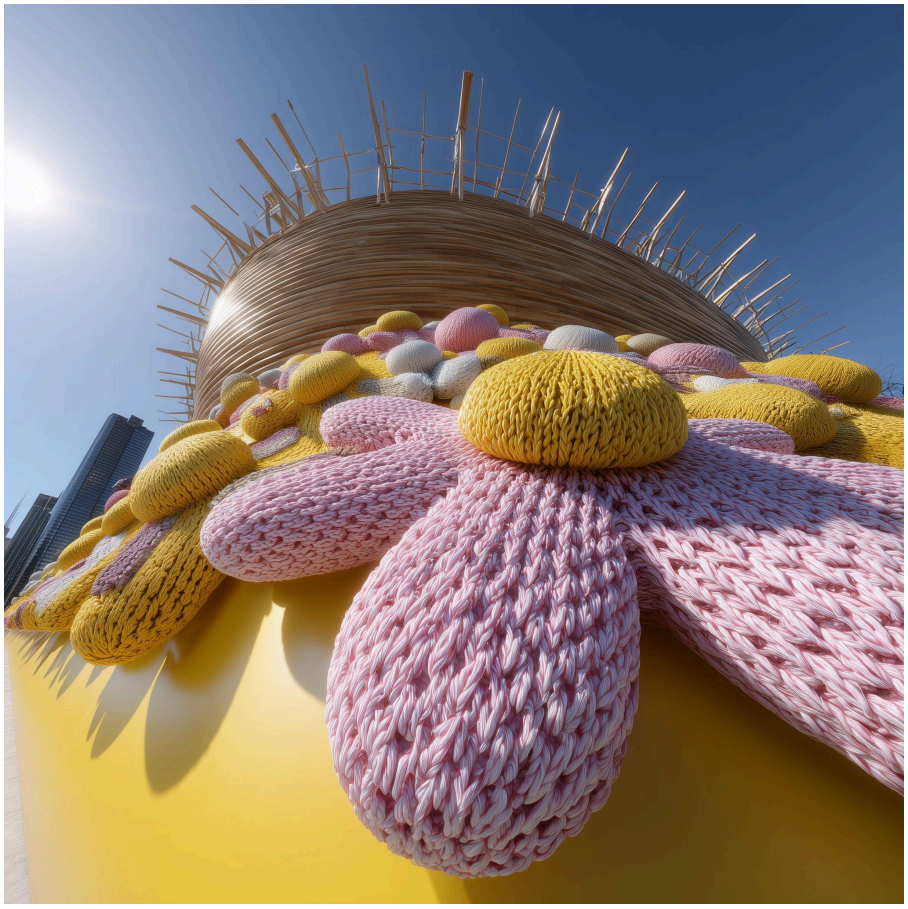
End of I. Dawn

II. MORNING



Chapter Five

The Cumulus Watches the Water

narrated by Ribeira

7:15 a.m. · Clark Street Bridge

I am aboard. I am standing near the bow of the Daisy-Skirted One, and my body is so much cloud that I do not cast a single sharp shadow on her deck — only a soft gradient, a dimness that the rising sun is still deciding what to do with. Of the five of us, I am the one who watches. Alba stands. Corrente carries. Rio walks. Violeta arrives. I watch. This has been my assignment since I became aware that I had a body, and my body is mostly a soft accumulation of cylinders stacked and

re-stacked until what peeks out at the bottom is a pair of small feet and what peeks out at the top is nothing at all — no face, no eyes, no visible mouth. I see through a seam in the cloud. I see very well.

The Daisy-Skirted One is cutting east under Clark Street Bridge. The bridge passes above us and I feel its shadow move across my soft surface the way a hand moves across the surface of a lake — a brief cool drag and then the sun returns. The bridge is raised only at the height of summer now, for the tall boats; on a Tuesday in July it holds its horizontal and the cars hum across it and none of the drivers know that below them is passing a vessel the size of a house, wearing daisies the size of dinner plates, piloted by a grandmother named Lucia with a missing front tooth on the left side.

Or rather, some of the drivers know. I watch them. One driver in a silver sedan slows almost to a stop on the bridge and presses their phone against the glass to take a photograph. Another driver in a red pickup honks the horn twice, not in anger — the honks are too brief, too cheerful — but in what I have come to recognize as a kind of urban blessing, the acknowledgment that something worth acknowledging is passing. A cyclist on the sidewalk of the bridge raises a hand in a small wave. A jogger in a yellow visor (not Violeta's visor, but a visor, and I notice these things) stops running and simply stands at the rail looking down. We are being seen. The watching is mutual.

I want to tell you what I have learned about watching, because it is my trade and because I believe it is a trade that the world has mostly forgotten. To watch well is not to observe. Observation implies distance, a scientific posture, a clipboard. To watch well is to be present to what one is seeing in such a way that the seeing alters both the seer and the seen. When I watch the river, the river is different afterward. When the river watches me back — and it does watch back, the river is not as passive as it looks — I am different afterward. This is not mysticism. It is physics, or biology, or some discipline that does not yet have a name. Attention is a form of contact. Contact is a form of change.

Below the bridge the water is the color of weak coffee with a splash of milk. It has been this color, on this stretch of the main stem, for about thirty years now — since the cleanup, since the return of the herons, since the city decided it wanted its river back. Before that the water was darker and stranger. Before that the water carried things it should not have carried. I know this because Marina City told me once, in a long slow conversation that took place over the course of a week, one sentence per morning. Marina City has been watching this water since 1964 and the towers

remember what the water looked like when it was unwell. I believe them. I also believe that the water remembers being unwell and is grateful, in whatever way water is grateful, to be well.

A heron stands in the shallows near the north bank, perfectly still, one leg tucked up, head angled at a thoughtful tilt. The heron is watching too. I have long believed that herons are my colleagues, my fellow practitioners — beings who have learned that the work of the world is often best performed by holding still and looking carefully. The heron does not know I am here; the heron is watching for fish, not for vessels; but we are doing the same work in different forms, and this is enough for me. I incline my cloud-body slightly in the heron's direction, which is my version of a nod.

Lucia at the helm is humming. I know the tune — it is an old Portuguese song her grandmother used to sing, about a woman who waits at a window for her sailor to return. Lucia has told me about this song, in one of our long conversations on the dock, back when I was still learning the Daisy-Skirted One's name. The song is, on its face, a sad song. But Lucia hums it as if it were not sad. She hums it in a major key even though the original melody is in a minor key. When I asked her about this she laughed and said, At my age you get to change the keys. The sailor came home anyway. Everyone is home. Why should I sing it sad?

I think about that often. Lucia's permission to transpose. This is what we are doing on the river today, I think. We are transposing. The old songs of the Chicago River — the songs of dirty water, of industrial traffic, of the working river that did not have time for flowers — those songs were not wrong. They were sung in the key that the century could hear. We are not erasing them. We are transposing them up a minor third, into a brighter register, because this century has learned to hear differently, and the river has earned a brighter key.

Behind us I can feel the wake of the Daisy-Giant, who has fallen in behind the Daisy-Skirted One in the flotilla. The Daisy-Giant is older, slower, and her wake is wider than ours. Behind her the Ribbed One is still being towed from the construction dock — she is not yet clad, not yet ready to move on her own power, and she will take up her chapter later in the morning, once the daisies have begun to be applied. Behind her the Bouquet-Hulled. Behind her the elder bead-gardened vessels. Behind them more, more, more. The entire soft armada of Marina City is moving east under a bridge, and I am at the bow of the lead vessel, watching.

The driver of the silver sedan has taken their photograph and moved on. The cyclist has waved and moved on. The jogger in the yellow visor is still at the rail, still watching. I watch the jogger watch us. The jogger is not yet willing to move on. I see them take their phone out, then put it back in their pocket, then put their hands on the rail instead, then simply rest their chin on their hands. They are, I think, being rearranged by what they are seeing. This is what I had hoped for, though I did not know I had hoped for it until it began to happen.

A watcher watching a watcher watching a river. A cloud at the bow, a heron in the shallows, a jogger at the rail. All of us suspended in the same morning light, held in the same soft transposition. I do not know the jogger's name and I never will. But for a moment — long enough to matter — we are companions in the same practice.

The Daisy-Skirted One clears the bridge and opens into the wider stem of the river. Light floods us. The jogger, behind us now, is still at the rail. I let my cloud-body open a little wider at the top, the way a pastry puffs when it reaches temperature, and I turn my seam of seeing eastward, toward the lake, toward the lock, toward the noon where we will all converge. The watching continues. It is the oldest job. It is among the few jobs the world cannot do without, though the world often forgets to pay it. I do not need to be paid. The watching itself is the wage.

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Chapter Six

I Am the One Wearing Daisies

narrated by the Daisy Giant

7:45 a.m. · Dearborn Street Bridge

I have been wearing daisies for three summers now, and I can tell you that the wearing gets easier. The first summer I was self-conscious. My hull is one of the larger hulls in the armada — I am long and broad-bellied, what the old shipwrights called a packet, though I carry no cargo besides myself — and when I was first clad in my yellow bead-cloth and my scattered pink daisies I worried that I looked, from a distance, ridiculous. A thing this big in a thing this bright seemed, to me, to be asking

for too much. I wanted to be more modest. I wanted to be a tugboat, perhaps, or a commercial tour boat in sensible gray. But the builders had chosen yellow, and yellow I became.

I want to speak about getting used to one's own brightness, because I think it is a thing that is not often spoken of honestly. There is a version of this story in which a vessel is born in flowers, loves her flowers immediately, and never doubts them. That was not my story. My story was that I was born in flowers, doubted them for a full season, came to tolerate them the second season, and only in the third summer — this summer — began to understand that the flowers were not an imposition but a gift, and that the gift had been given to me specifically, and that the specificity of the gift was part of what made it a gift. I was not dressed in generic brightness. I was dressed in my brightness, pink and yellow and white daisies arranged in a pattern that a team of knitters had designed by studying the way my particular cheeks curved, my particular shoulders sloped, my particular stern tapered. They had made me a dress. The dress fit me. It took me three years to stop pretending the dress was wrong.

I am saying all this because I want the Daisy-Skirted One, who is leading the flotilla ahead of me this morning, to know that her own getting-used-to is permitted to take its time. I can see her from here. She is humming along in her first wake, her crown of dinner-plate daisies catching the light, her cable-knit skirt moving slightly with the chop, and I can tell — in the way one vessel can always tell another — that she is in the first-summer phase of her self-regard. Which is to say: she is magnificent and she half-believes it. The half that believes is larger than it will be next year. The half that doesn't is smaller than it was yesterday. She is exactly where she should be, on the morning of her first voyage, in the wearing of her first dress.

The Dearborn Street Bridge is coming up. I pass under it the way I always pass under it — steady, broad, unhurried. There is a metal grate in the roadway above, and the sun comes through it in hundreds of small rectangles, and for a few seconds my entire deck is striped with light. This is one of my favorite moments of any river passage. The light on a grated bridge turns a vessel into a piece of sheet music for a moment — black-and-white-striped, rhythmic, countable. I let myself be the sheet music. I hum in what I hope is the right key.

On the south bank a tour boat is docked at its mooring, loading its first passengers of the day. The tour boat is gray and efficient and lettered with a large corporate logo. The tour boat is not clad in flowers. The tour boat does not need to be clad in flowers. The tour boat has its own job and its own dignity, and its job is to carry tourists up and down the main stem while an amplified voice tells

them about Mies van der Rohe and the Wrigley Building and the reversal of the river. I love the tour boats. I want to say this clearly because it would be easy, in a novella about soft vessels, to set up a contrast in which hard gray boats are the villains and soft flowered boats are the heroes. This is not the novella we are in. The tour boats are not villains. The tour boats are our siblings. They are the plain-dressed cousins who show up to the family reunion in khakis and a button-down while we show up in sequins, and everyone is welcome at the table, and the table itself is the river.

I do want to say, though, that it took me three years to stop being envious of the tour boats. In my first summer, when I was self-conscious, I looked at their plain gray hulls and thought, they get to be serious, and I have to be a flower. In my second summer I looked at them and thought, they get to have a job, and I have to be decoration. By the third summer — which is to say, this summer, this morning, right now — I look at them and think, we each have the hull we have. The tour boats carry information. I carry, I suppose, invitation. Both are cargoes. Both are labor. Neither is lesser.

A child on the tour boat sees me. I can tell because the child's whole body shifts, the way a child's whole body shifts when it has just seen the most interesting thing in its morning so far, and the child tugs on the sleeve of an adult and points directly at me. The adult looks up from their phone. The adult's face passes through the stations I have come to know — first a neutral registration, then a small opening of the eyes, then a softening around the mouth, then a laugh that is not mocking, not embarrassed, but surprised and grateful. The adult raises their phone. But then — and this is the part I want to remember — the adult lowers the phone without taking the picture, and simply looks at me, and waves. It is a small wave. It is not performative. It is the wave one adult gives another adult when they have been reminded, unexpectedly, that life is still capable of surprise.

I incline my bow slightly in response. I cannot wave — I do not have the appendages — but a large packet-hulled vessel can, by minute adjustments of her trim, express a kind of greeting. I express one. The adult sees it. The child claps, once, a single delighted clap. I pass on under the bridge and the tour boat recedes behind me, and the adult's wave and the child's clap stay with me the way a warm coal stays in a fire long after the log has burned down — not loudly, but steadily, and for a long time.

The wearing of daisies is not a costume. I know this now. It is an argument, yes, as the Foreword of this book will say — though I should not be citing the Foreword, because a vessel is not supposed to know it is in a book; forgive me; it is early still and I am feeling expansive. Let me say only that the wearing of daisies is something I have agreed to, over and over, summer after summer,

through the small and accumulating permissions of being seen. I am the one wearing daisies. I am this one. I am this specific one. And the Daisy-Skirted One, ahead of me, in her first wake, is learning what I have learned: that being the specific one is, in the end, the only restful thing.

The flotilla moves east. The bridges pass one by one. The light is lifting. The tour boat's child is now, I am told — I am told because I can feel the distant vibration of small happy feet — running up and down the tour-boat deck announcing what they have seen to anyone who will listen. The announcement, in the end, is what I am for. I do not mind being announced. This is a late-summer permission, three years in the making, and it was worth every season.

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Chapter Seven

The Hi-Vis Chorus I

narrated by the Knitters

8:15 a.m. · State Street Bridge scaffolding, Marina City east tower

We are seven on the east scaffold and six on the west and four on the daisy-chain at the waterline and three in the warehouse cutting panels and two at the coffee cart because someone has to go get the coffee and the coffee cart is two blocks west under the elevated tracks. We are, all told, twenty-two this morning. We have been as many as thirty-one on a given day this spring and as few as nine on the Saturday of the snowstorm. We are a crew. That is what we have chosen to call ourselves. We had other names proposed — the knitting corps, the soft team, the armada's

apprentices — but in the end crew was the one that stuck. A crew is a group of people who have shown up. That is all it is. That is all it has ever been.

Our gloves are the cheap kind, the cotton ones with the rubber dots on the palms. Our vests are the standard high-visibility yellow with the silver reflective bands across the chest and the back. Our hardhats are white or yellow or — in the case of Sam on the west scaffold — a bright unauthorized pink that Sam painted themselves one evening after a long day. The foreman looked at Sam's pink hardhat and shrugged. The foreman is not a stickler. The foreman is, in fact, one of us — a former ironworker named Bea who took this job because, as she told us on our first day, I wanted to build something that my grandkids would come see. The grandkids have come. They came last Saturday with cupcakes.

We are saying this all together. We want to make that clear. What you are reading is not the voice of any one of us; it is the voice the twenty-two of us make when we stand on scaffolding at eight-fifteen in the morning and look at what we are doing. This is how choruses have always spoken. In the old Greek plays a chorus was a group of citizens who stood at the edge of the action and commented on it; our commentary is not literary, it is material; we comment by stitching; but the principle is the same. A chorus says we. A chorus says what the soloists cannot say, because the soloists are too busy being themselves to notice that they are being themselves in front of anyone.

Here is what we notice, from up here on the scaffolding. We notice that the Daisy-Skirted One has cleared Clark Street. We notice that Lucia at the helm is humming. We notice that Ribeira has taken up their position at the bow and has not moved in forty minutes, which is normal for Ribeira. We notice that Corrente has gone back to the warehouse for the second load of the morning and is walking briskly enough that their bundle is bouncing on their shoulder in a rhythm that matches the rhythm of Bea's nail-gun on the scaffold. We notice, because we are always noticing, that the daisy-chain at the waterline is two panels short of complete, and that the missing panels are on the truck that is due at ten, and that when the truck arrives the four of us at the waterline will need to stop the coffee break we have not yet taken and install them before eleven because the committee wants the towers fully clad by sunset and sunset is at 8:14 this evening.

We want to say something about the hands. We have been asked about the hands many times. A reporter came out last week and asked whether we found it demeaning, as construction workers, to be installing what she called knitwear. We answered her politely. We answered her with our gloves on. We told her that knitting is one of the oldest construction techniques in human history, that you

cannot build a fishing net or a cargo sling or a tent or a hammock or a sail without some form of looping interlock, that the distinction between a crane-lift and a knitted panel is a distinction of scale and material and not of kind, and that the hands that install a yellow cable-knit skirt on a sixty-two-year-old concrete tower are the same hands that would install anything else, because hands are hands, and the world is built by hands, and any hand that refuses to touch softness is a hand that has given up half its usefulness. We said all this politely. The reporter nodded. The article came out fine, in the end.

We do not usually give speeches. We are giving one today because today is the last day, and on the last day of any project a crew is permitted to be a little grander than usual. Usually we are quiet. We sing sometimes, as Corrente noticed earlier — bits of pop songs and lullabies and one particular hymn nobody quite remembers — but mostly we work. The work is the speech. Every stitch placed is a sentence. Every panel installed is a paragraph. We have been writing this tower since April. We have been writing this armada for three years. By sunset we will have finished the present chapter, and tomorrow we will begin a new chapter on a different building, a different hull, a different edge of the city that has asked for softness.

A word about who we are. We are, on this crew: three trans women, two trans men, four non-binary people, one genderfluid person whose pronouns shift weekly and who is fine with any pronoun you pick on a given day so long as you say it with conviction, eight lesbians, two gay men, and three straight allies who have told us repeatedly that they feel slightly out of place on the crew and have been told repeatedly by the rest of us that they are welcome, that their straightness is not a disqualification, that the crew needs hands and not identities, and that everyone on the crew is, in their own way, an outsider anyway. The ironworker Bea used to say: if you are the kind of person who shows up to build soft things, you are already the kind of outsider we are looking for. Bea is no longer the foreman — she retired this spring — but her sentence is still in circulation. We repeat it to every new hire.

We are aware that we are small. Twenty-two is not a large number. Thirty-one on a good day is not a large number. A city of three million people is built by larger crews than ours. But we have found, over the three years of this project, that a small crew that has been together long enough begins to act like a single body. Our twenty-two pairs of hands are one hundred and ten fingers. Our hundred and ten fingers have been moving together, more or less, for three summers. What we install has the quality of something installed by one very patient, very large, very coordinated person.

The vessels can feel this. The towers can feel this. Marina City told us, through Bea, in April, that we were doing good work. We were proud.

The sun has cleared the Loop and is beginning to hit the east face of the tower where we are working. Our reflective bands begin to catch it; from the river below it probably looks like there are small bright stars moving on the scaffolding. We like this. We do not mind being small bright stars. A chorus should glitter a little, in the right light. It is part of the job.

We have another four hours of work before the daisy-chain panels arrive. We turn back to our stitching. The voice we have been using will rest now. We will speak again later this afternoon, at the handoff, when the South Branch crew finishes their work and we welcome them into our count. Until then we are, as usual, quiet. The stitching is the speech. The hands are the voice. Carry on.

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Chapter Eight

A Vessel That Was Once Only Wood

narrated by the Ribbed One

8:50 a.m. · Wabash Avenue Bridge, under tow

I am being towed. I want to begin there, because my condition this morning is unusual — I am not yet under my own power, I am not yet clad, I am a hull at the stage of my life when my ribs are still visible from the outside and my deck has been laid down only in patches. A small blue tugboat named Vinnie is pulling me east under Wabash Avenue Bridge, and I am moving because Vinnie is moving, and the water parts around my unfinished bow with a thin hiss because my bow has not yet been sealed and painted and softened. I look, from the other boats' perspective, like a skeleton. This

is fine. I do not mind looking like a skeleton. A skeleton is a body that has not yet put on its dress, but a body that will. I am in the not-yet phase, and not-yet is its own condition, and I intend to honor it before I move on.

My ribs are Alaskan yellow cedar, steam-bent over a three-week period in February in the warehouse where I was born. Each rib was a single plank when it went into the steam box and a curved arc when it came out, and the curving is irreversible; the cedar remembers the shape and will keep the shape for the rest of my long life. I know this because my builders told me, in the way builders tell a vessel things while they are building her — not by saying them but by doing them, by running their hands along the grain, by tapping the rib to hear whether the wood had taken the curve cleanly, by murmuring to each other about tension and spring-back. A vessel learns her own anatomy by being made. I learned my ribs by hearing the tap of them.

This morning, as I am towed east by Vinnie, my ribs are bare to the sun. The deck planks that will eventually cover my amidships have been laid only from the stern to the mainmast step; past the mainmast step, forward, I am open to the sky. Anyone looking down at me from the Wabash Avenue Bridge can see into my interior. They can see the bilge. They can see the place where the fuel tank will sit. They can see the knee of the mast step, the curve of the deadwood, the grain of the cedar ribs — everything that a finished vessel keeps private. I do not mind being seen like this. I will mind, perhaps, when I am finished; a finished vessel is allowed her privacy; but while I am being built I am a public body, a body whose interior is part of the neighborhood's ongoing view, and I accept this as the price of becoming.

The builders have told me what I will look like when I am clad. My hull will be wrapped in bands of cream and pale pink knit, with a broad saffron band at the waterline. My stern will carry a single large daisy — a portrait-size daisy, the builders call it, because it is meant to be seen as the defining feature of my stern, the way a face is the defining feature of a person. My deck, once sealed, will be painted in a pattern of small blue and yellow flowers against a white ground — a pattern the designers took from an old kitchen oilcloth that one of them found at an estate sale, which I appreciate; my ancestry will include a kitchen, which is the most hospitable room. I am to be launched in late August. That gives me six more weeks of being open to the sky.

Why am I being towed through the main stem today, if I am not yet complete? The answer is simple and I want to give it. I am being towed because the committee wanted the whole armada represented in the day's passage, finished or not, and because Marina City — who is, in some sense,

my grandparent; the towers have been built longer than I have been built, and their cladding is my cladding's precedent — insisted that the unfinished members of the family not be hidden. Marina City told the committee: bring the ones who are still becoming. The becoming is the point. A flotilla that shows only its finished vessels is a flotilla that is pretending becoming is something to be ashamed of. Marina City does not believe in that pretense. Neither do I. So here I am, towed by Vinnie, bare-ribbed and half-decked, moving east under Wabash Avenue Bridge alongside my fully dressed siblings, and I am not ashamed. I am, in fact, a little proud. The not-yet is allowed to be a little proud. It is a difficult posture and I am holding it well.

A kayaker is paddling alongside me on my port side. The kayaker is alone in a lime-green single kayak and is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat against the sun. The kayaker has been keeping pace with me for about twenty minutes. I know the kayaker is looking at my ribs because I can see their head turn and their chin lift every few strokes, the way a person looks at a thing they are trying to understand. I want to tell the kayaker something. I want to tell the kayaker: you are allowed to look. I am being shown. The builders built me in a warehouse for four months and then they decided to bring me out into the daylight before I was finished, and this is not a mistake, and you are not intruding by looking. A skeleton deserves a witness. A body mid-becoming deserves a witness. Please keep paddling beside me. Please keep looking.

I cannot say this, of course. A vessel under tow does not address a kayaker directly; it would be alarming. But I angle my bare bow slightly toward the kayaker's boat — a half-degree, nothing dramatic — and the kayaker registers the angle and paddles a stroke closer, and we move together under the bridge in a small asymmetric companionship that will end when our paths diverge. The kayaker will turn back toward their launch point. I will continue east with Vinnie. But for these few hundred yards we are together, the finished small green boat and the unfinished large cedar-ribbed one, and the river carries us both as if we were equally legitimate, which we are.

I want to end with this. I have been asked — my builders ask me this all the time, rhetorically, as they work — whether I would prefer to be finished already. Whether the not-yet chafes. Whether I wish I could skip ahead to the summer when I will be clad in cream and pink and saffron and set loose on the river under my own power. The honest answer is: no. I am enjoying this. The not-yet has a quality that the finished cannot have. The not-yet is transparent; anyone can look inside me; my knees and my keel and my rib-ends are public property; I do not have to perform completeness.

I will perform completeness when I am complete, and I will perform it happily, but right now I am performing becoming, and becoming is a rarer and more precious role. I do not wish to hurry it.

Vinnie tugs us forward. Wabash Avenue Bridge passes overhead. The kayaker stays close. My cedar ribs hold their curve and my half-deck holds its nails and my open sky is full of morning, and somewhere ahead the lock at Lake Michigan waits for all of us, the finished and the not-yet, to arrive together at noon.

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End of II. Morning

III. NOON

Chapter Nine

Reis Walking East

narrated by Rio

11:00 a.m. · Michigan Avenue Bridge

I have been walking for six hours. This is not unusual for me. I walk the way other people breathe — without counting, without effort, without wondering whether the walking is earning its keep. My legs are long beneath the speckled mustard weight of my body, and my pink knit booties take the boards one after the next with the quiet confidence of something that has been doing this for a long time. I came from the lake side of the river this morning, walking west. I will arrive at the lock at

noon. Between these two points is simply the morning, and the morning is simply walking, and the walking is simply how I pay my respects to the distance.

There is a version of joy that moves. I want to name it, because I think it is not named often enough. The world tends to describe joy as a stillness — a contented heart, a cup that overflows, a seated bliss — and this is true for some kinds of joy. It is true for Alba's joy, which stands. It is true for Ribeira's joy, which watches. But there is another kind of joy that cannot be held still, that is in fact destroyed by being held still, that must be walked. My joy is this kind. When I walk I am paying a long patient debt to the ground, and the ground is paying me back in rhythm, and between the debt and the payment I am happy in a very particular way — the way a metronome is happy, the way a swinging door is happy, the way an old song is happy when it reaches the chorus one more time and the body of the singer has not yet tired of singing it.

I am passing under Michigan Avenue Bridge. The bridge is at the mouth of the main stem, almost at the lock, almost at noon — I am close now, I am very close, and yet I am not hurrying. To hurry would be to break the practice. I have set my pace at three miles per hour since daybreak and I will keep that pace until I arrive, because the pace is the prayer, and the prayer is what I have come to offer. A person who hurries their prayer has forgotten what prayer is for.

The speckled mustard on my body is not a uniform color. If you looked closely — as the kayaker yesterday looked closely, pausing on the Riverwalk to study me as I passed — you would see that the yellow is flecked with darker particles, small irregular dark shapes scattered through the knit. These are not imperfections. These are intentional. My body was knitted with a specific dye-process that leaves the fibers slightly speckled, as if I had just walked through a field and picked up pollen, or as if a wind had passed over me carrying small seeds. The speckling is my signature. It says: I have been walking. It says: I am of the field, not of the warehouse. It says: I have come from somewhere and I am going somewhere, and between somewhere and somewhere is the only place I have ever lived.

Alberto Caeiro, who was Fernando Pessoa's pastoral heteronym, once wrote that the road is more real than the thing beyond the road. I do not think Caeiro was wrong, exactly, but I would put it differently. The road is the thing beyond the road. The walking is the arrival. There is no second step to the sentence. I do not walk in order to get somewhere; I walk in order to have walked, and having walked is the only somewhere I need.

I know that I will arrive at the lock at noon. I know this the way any walker knows their own pace — by the gradual matching of the body's rhythm to the distance. I have been watching the bridges pass one by one. Lake Shore Drive at ten-fifteen. Columbus at ten-thirty-five. Michigan at eleven exactly. Wabash at eleven-fifteen. State Street at eleven-twenty-five. Clark at eleven-thirty-five. The lock at noon. This is the gospel of the long walker: the body knows where it is in time, because the body is a clock made of muscles and the muscles keep perfect time when they are not being rushed.

Below me the river flows east, toward the lake. Today the river is flowing its original direction, for a ceremonial hour — this is one of the things the committee has arranged. Normally the river flows west, toward the Mississippi, because of the reversal in 1900; but at noon today, for one hour, the lock will be opened in the reverse configuration and the river will be allowed to remember its ancestral motion. The lake will breathe into the city. The city will drink from the lake. This is a gift the lock gives once a year, on anniversaries, and the committee has timed it for today. I am walking toward the hour when the river remembers itself.

A woman in a red coat — I say coat because she is wearing a long garment though it is warm; I suspect she is wearing the coat because she has nowhere else to put it — has been walking behind me for about a mile. I noticed her near Lake Shore Drive and I have been tracking her progress in the reflection of shop windows along the Riverwalk. She is not following me. She is walking the same route at the same pace because her legs are her legs and my legs are my legs and the Riverwalk permits only certain speeds. But she has been close enough, for long enough, that I have come to think of her as a companion. I have not turned around. A walker does not turn around, as a matter of principle. But I know she is there, and I believe she knows I am there, and this knowing is enough.

Somewhere behind me the flotilla is catching up. I can hear the low diesel hum of the Daisy-Skirted One's engine, very faint, coming up the main stem. She is moving at the speed of a slow walk — a coincidence I appreciate. The boat moves at three miles per hour. I walk at three miles per hour. We are matched. By the time the flotilla reaches the lock I will already be there, standing at the lake-side railing, watching them arrive. This is the choreography of the day and I am the walking part of it.

I am, among the five of us, the one who has chosen discipline. Alba stands and that is enough. Corrente carries and that is enough. Ribeira watches and that is enough. Violeta arrives and that will,

in due course, be enough. I walk. I have chosen a pace and I have kept the pace. This is my discipline, and discipline is what I have offered to the community of the armada — not because anyone asked for it, but because a community benefits from at least one member who is committed to a long repetitive motion at a steady rate. A community without rhythm is a community that loses track of itself. I am the rhythm. I am not proud of this. Or rather: I am proud of it in the way one is proud of a well-kept garden, which is to say, quietly, and only when no one is asking.

The Michigan Avenue Bridge passes overhead. The traffic above makes a sound like a long exhale. On the south end of the bridge, on the pedestrian sidewalk, a clarinetist is busking. I can hear the clarinet from here, a slow blues, the kind of tune that slows a walker's heart without stopping it. I adjust my pace minutely to match the clarinet's phrasing — a micro-adjustment, a hundredth of a mile per hour — and for the span of thirty-two bars I am walking to live music in the open air of a summer Tuesday. The clarinetist does not know I am their audience. This is the best way to be someone's audience.

The river beside me has begun, subtly, to change direction. I can see it in the eddies near the pilings — they are rotating counter to their usual sense. The lock is being prepared. The lake is about to breathe in. The hour of reversal is beginning. I am close now. The lock is just ahead. I can see the gray gates of it rising against the blue of Lake Michigan beyond.

I do not hurry. I do not need to hurry. I am, as always, on time.

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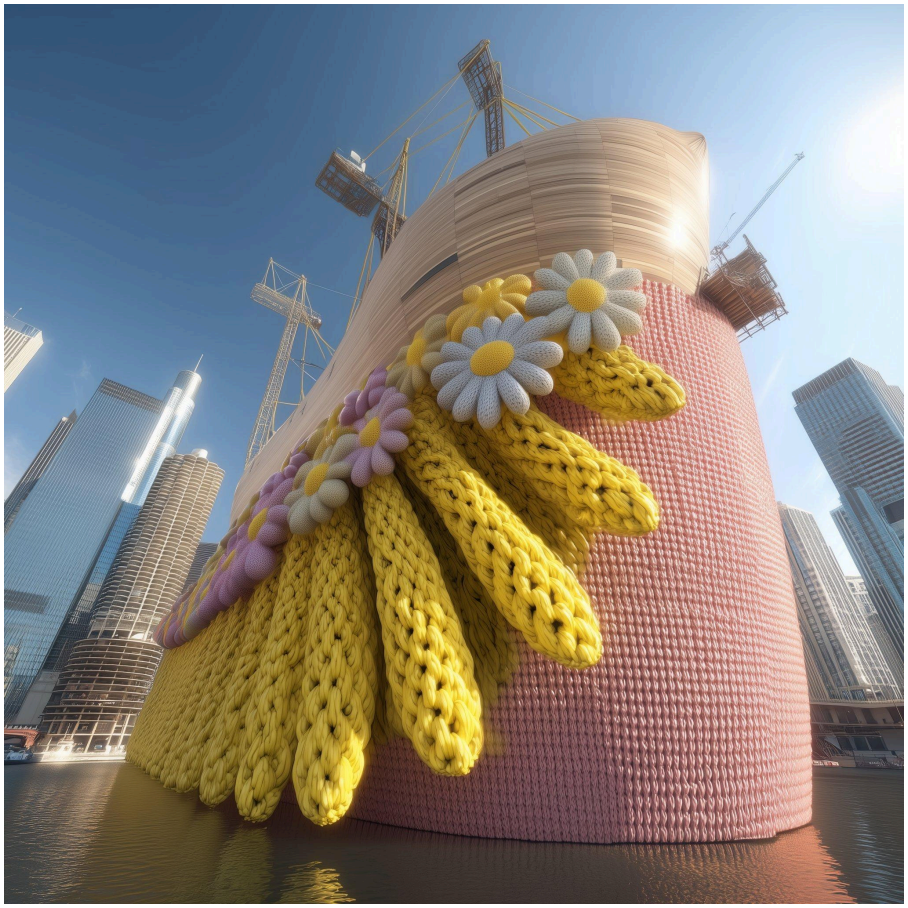

Chapter Ten

I Am the Bouquet-Hulled

narrated by the Bouquet-Hulled

11:30 a.m. · Columbus Drive Bridge

I am the one with the flowers on my chest. I want to begin there because that is, plainly, my most visible feature — a great spray of knitted daisies across the forward port quarter of my hull, pink and blue and white and yellow and cream, arranged in what my builders called a corsage pattern, which is to say, a pattern that is not random but is not quite orderly either: the way a handful of flowers falls when a hand has been holding them and then opens. I am, in a sense, an opened hand. I am the river's bouquet. This is my name and I have learned to be it.

I am unlike most of the other vessels in the armada in that my daisies are not a single color. The Daisy-Skirted One wears pink and cream on her crown. The Daisy Giant wears pink and white. The Furred One, who is further back in the flotilla and whom you will meet in the Afternoon, wears a more chaotic scatter of pink and magenta and gold against a soft ground. But my daisies are a full garden. Pink, yes, and cream, yes, but also blue, which almost none of the others have — I have two large cornflower-blue daisies near my bow, and three smaller ones scattered toward the stern — and yellow, many yellows, the buttery kind and the egg-yolk kind and the pale-pale-almost-green kind. I am a whole meadow compressed onto a single hull, and I carry that meadow with, I think, a certain responsibility.

The responsibility is this: I have been told, by the committee and by my builders and by several of the elder vessels, that my particular job in the armada is to demonstrate variety. I am the vessel who proves that the soft aesthetic does not have to be monochromatic. I am the evidence that pink and yellow are not the only colors that can carry a queer hull down a Chicago river. When children see me they point at the blue daisies first. When adults see me they notice the blue daisies second, usually after they have processed the whole corsage, and their faces change — a small tightening, then a loosening — as if the blue had granted them some permission that the pink alone would not have granted. I do not know why the blue does this. I am not a color theorist. But I have watched it happen enough times that I have come to trust the pattern. The blue is doing work.

I am passing under Columbus Drive Bridge. The bridge is wide and low and the sun is high enough now that the shadow underneath it is sharp at the edges — a rectangle of coolness laid across the water. I pass through the rectangle and emerge into the sun again, and my blue daisies flash, momentarily, as if they had been rinsed. There is something the blue does in full sun that the pink and the yellow cannot do: it holds against the light. The pink pales in strong sun. The yellow becomes the same yellow as the sun and almost disappears. But the blue — the blue becomes more itself, more saturated, more argumentative. I am proud of my blue daisies in a way I try not to be too proud of, because my builders would tell me, if they were here, that all the daisies matter equally. But the blue is special. I will say that plainly, because plainness is the only honest way to talk about color.

On the south bank the Riverwalk is busy with tourists. A tour group of about fifteen people has stopped to photograph me. I can see their phones raised in a loose constellation, like small glowing windows. I have learned, over my three summers on the river, not to perform for cameras. The vessels who perform tend to become tired by midsummer; the vessels who do not perform — who

simply pass through the frame the way a cloud passes through a sky — tend to stay fresh year after year. I am staying fresh. I pass through the tour group's camera frames without adjusting my angle or my speed. I am, in this moment, being a cloud.

A man near the back of the tour group is not holding a phone. I notice him because he is the only one not holding a phone. He is standing at the railing with his hands in his pockets and he is looking at me, not at a screen. He is perhaps sixty, perhaps a little older, wearing a short-sleeved plaid shirt and gray trousers. His hair is thinning. He is not smiling, but his face is not unfriendly. He is looking at me with the expression of a man who is being reminded of something he had not thought about in a long time. I do not know what he is being reminded of. It could be a quilt his mother made. It could be a garden his grandmother kept. It could be a particular summer afternoon in the nineteen-sixties when he saw, for the first time, a kind of flower he had not known existed. I do not need to know. The reminding is not for me. The reminding is for him. My job, in that moment, is simply to be the occasion of it.

I am saying too much about being looked at. This has been my tendency, over three summers. I was designed to be a conversational hull — the builders spoke of me as the one who would carry the widest range of color, the widest argument — and so I have developed, perhaps, the sensibility of a public speaker who knows their audience too well. I will try to be quieter now. Let me tell you about the water instead.

The water around me at Columbus Drive is moving east, subtly. Rio mentioned this in the previous chapter and it is true: the lock is preparing for the noon reversal, and the main stem is beginning to breathe backward toward the lake, toward its ancestral direction. I can feel this in my hull. A vessel who has been traveling one way down a river for three summers develops a subtle preferential pressure on one side of her keel; when the flow reverses, the pressure redistributes, and the reshaping is perceptible. It is like turning over in bed at dawn, just before waking. The whole body adjusting to a new orientation without quite knowing why.

I am slowing as I approach the lock. The flotilla ahead of me is slowing too. We will all reach the lock together, more or less at noon, and we will be held in the lock-basin while the reversal is completed, and then the gates will open onto Lake Michigan and we will pass through in single file onto the big water, where Violeta will be waiting at the harbor. This is the day's deepest moment. I have been told, by the elder vessels, that the passage through the lock on reversal-day is something I will remember for the rest of my life. I believe them. The elder vessels do not exaggerate.

Ahead of me the Daisy-Skirted One has cleared the last bridge. I can see her pink crown, small from this distance but bright in the high sun, against the blue-gray rectangle of the lock gate. She is first in line. She will pass through first. I am pleased by this — her first voyage, her first lock, her first lake. A vessel's first passage through a lock is a kind of second birth, and the Daisy-Skirted One is about to have hers. I am grateful to be behind her. I will watch her go through and I will follow.

My blue daisies are catching the late-morning light. I am the one with the flowers on my chest. I am the proof that the garden can be a full garden, not just a pink one. I am passing under the last bridge before the lock, and the river is breathing backward around my hull, and the man in the plaid shirt has turned to say something to his companion, and the companion is smiling, and none of this is for me — all of it is for them — but I have been the occasion, and being the occasion is enough. It is, in fact, the highest job. I have come to think so, anyway, over three summers of being looked at by people who did not know they were about to be reminded.

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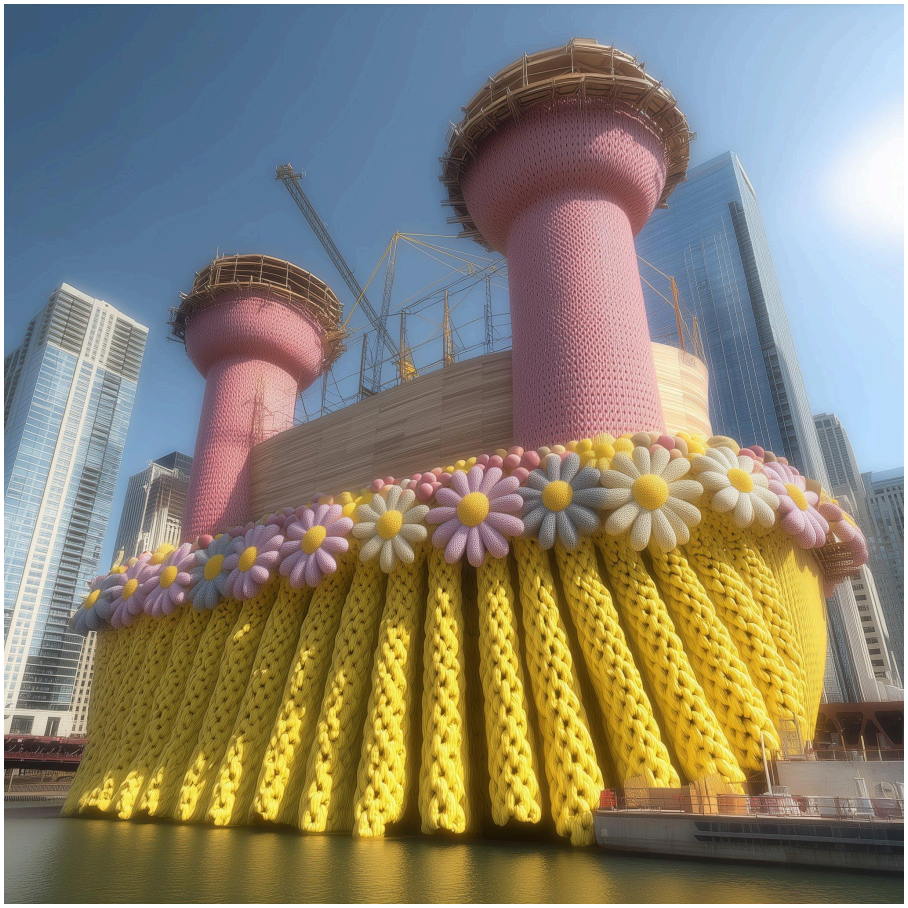

Chapter Eleven

The Lock Speaks

narrated by the Chicago Harbor Lock

12:00 noon · the threshold between river and lake

I am the hinge. I want to begin there because hinge is the only word that is accurate. I am the place where the river ends and the lake begins, or equally where the lake ends and the river begins — it depends on which direction the water is moving on any given hour — and the determination of that direction is, in fact, my work. I open and I close. I rise and I fall. I hold the water back and I let the water through. I have been doing this since 1938, and in all that time I have not been ashamed of my function, though I have sometimes been surprised by its reach.

Today I am being asked to do something I do only once a year. I am being asked to reverse. Normally, every day, I permit water to pass from the river into the lake at a rate that preserves the city's reversed current — the engineered westward flow that has held, with small adjustments, for a hundred and twenty-six years. Today, at noon, for one hour, I am to open my east gate and allow the lake to breathe into the river. The river will flow east, briefly, the way it once flowed before the engineers changed it. The city will drink from the lake, briefly, the way the city once drank before the cholera outbreaks made such drinking unsafe. The engineers of 1900 did not foresee this hour. They designed me to prevent it. But I have, over my decades, developed my own small permissions, and the committee has requested this hour, and I have agreed.

I want to be clear about what I am and what I am not. I am not nostalgic for the original flow. The original flow was toxic; the original flow killed people; the original flow is not a thing I wish to restore permanently. The reversal of 1900 was one of the great acts of civic love in the history of cities — an entire river changed to save the humans who depended on it — and I honor that reversal every hour of every day by holding the new direction. But once a year, for one hour, I permit the old flow to exist again, not because the old flow was better, but because a thing that cannot remember its own history is a thing that does not fully exist. An hour of ancestral motion is a form of memory. I am, for one hour, a memorial.

The flotilla is arriving. I can feel them at my west gate, lined up in order — the Daisy-Skirted One first, then the Daisy Giant, then the Ribbed One under tow, then the Bouquet-Hulled, then the elder bead-gardened vessels, then more, more, more. Twenty-three vessels in all, plus the tug Vinnie, plus three kayakers who asked for special permission last week and received it. They are waiting for me. They know my protocol. They will enter my basin in single file, and I will close the west gate behind them, and I will lower the water level in my basin to match the lake, and I will open the east gate, and they will pass through into Lake Michigan in the order they entered. This is the locking cycle. It takes approximately fourteen minutes.

But today, because of the reversal, the cycle will be different. Today, after the flotilla has entered my basin and the west gate has closed, I will — for the first time in a year — permit water from the lake to flow through me westward into the river. For one hour. The flotilla will hold its position in my basin during that hour. They will not move; they will simply be held, in my stone walls, while the lake breathes through the gap between us and the river remembers. Then, at one o'clock, I will close

the reversal and resume my normal function, and the flotilla will pass east into the lake, and the ceremony will be complete.

Rio has arrived at my north rail. I can feel their small weight. They are standing at the railing, speckled mustard in the high sun, watching the flotilla approach. They do not speak — they are a walker, and walkers do not speak at the arrival; they breathe — but their presence is a kind of commentary. A walker at the railing at the moment of the flotilla's arrival is a form of completion. The choreography is meeting itself. The walking and the sailing are converging at the hinge, which is me, and I am receiving them both.

I want to say a word about being a hinge. I believe hingeness is underrated as a form of being. Most of the grammar of the world is made of nouns — things that are what they are, statically — and most of what we admire is the statement of those nouns, the towers and the vessels and the figures who stand in their clothes and say, here I am. I admire those statements too. I have been admiring Marina City for sixty-two years, and Marina City is one of the best nouns I know. But a hinge is a different grammar. A hinge is a verb that has agreed to hold still. A hinge is the word between two words. A hinge is what permits the sentence to turn. Without hinges the world would be a list of assertions with no relations between them. I am, in this sense, a relation. I relate the river to the lake. I relate the westward to the eastward. I relate the city of 1900 to the city of today. I am not the nouns I connect. I am the connecting, and the connecting has its own dignity, even if it is rarely named.

The west gate opens. The Daisy-Skirted One enters my basin. Her hull is yellow cable-knit, her crown is pink and cream, her first wake is still behind her somewhere back at Marina City this morning, and now she is passing into my stone walls on her first lock-passage, and I can feel the slight shiver along her keel that every first-timer has. It is a good shiver. It is the shiver of a being who is being held by something larger than themselves for the first time. I have been holding first-timers in this shiver for eighty-eight years. I am practiced at it. I hold her gently.

Behind her the Daisy Giant enters. Then the Ribbed One under Vinnie's tow, her bare cedar ribs catching the noon light in pale amber stripes. Then the Bouquet-Hulled, her blue daisies flashing. Then the elder bead-gardened vessels, who know my walls as intimately as I know theirs. Then the smaller vessels. Then the kayaks. Then Vinnie finally detaches from the Ribbed One and takes her place in the stern of the line. The basin is full. I count twenty-three hulls plus one tug plus three kayaks. The count is correct. The west gate closes behind them.

And now, for one hour, the reversal begins.

I open the east gate slightly — not fully, just enough to permit the lake to flow through. Lake Michigan enters my basin. The water is colder than river water, cleaner, smelling of the open water to the east. The flotilla feels it immediately. I can sense the small adjustments of their hulls — the Daisy-Skirted One tilts half a degree to starboard, the Bouquet-Hulled settles into the cold current like a person sinking into a cool bath, the Ribbed One's bare ribs take on a faint sheen of condensation. Above the basin the wind from the lake smells of August and of algae and of small distant boats. The reversal is happening.

I will hold them here for an hour. In that hour the river west of me, the entire main stem of the Chicago River, will flow east again for the first time in twelve months. It will be a subtle thing. Most people in the city will not notice. The water will move perhaps a quarter of a mile per hour eastward — barely a flow, more of a long slow exhale — and at one o'clock it will stop, and the engineers will reinstate the normal westward flow, and the year's memorial will be complete. But for this hour, the ancestral Chicago River is alive. The herons know. The fish know. The old pilings, some of them dating to 1860, know. The flotilla, held in my basin, knows. Marina City, a mile upriver, knows — the towers can feel the shift in the pressure against their foundations, and they have told me, in their slow way, that they welcome it.

Violeta is arriving at the east gate, on the lake side. I can see her small boat — she has come by harbor, as is her way — and she is waiting for the reversal hour to finish so she can enter. She will enter from the east and pass westward through my basin and join the flotilla for the afternoon run into the branches. This is the choreography. The hinge is turning. The walking and the sailing and the arriving are all being held at my threshold for one hour, and then they will proceed.

I am the hinge. I hold. For one hour I hold an entire river's memory in my stone walls, and the memory is the water, and the water is the reversal, and the reversal is the ceremony, and the ceremony is the love that a city pays to its own river once a year on a Tuesday in late July. I have been receiving this love since 1938. I expect to be receiving it for a long time yet. A hinge does not tire. A hinge has been designed for duration. I open, I close, I hold, I release. This is what I am for.

The hour begins. The hour holds. The reversal moves west, away from me, up the river, past Columbus and Michigan and Wabash and State and Clark and LaSalle and all the bridges of the main stem, past Marina City, past Goose Island, up toward the branches, which will feel it last of all. The

whole river inhaling the lake for one hour. The whole city, for one hour, drinking from its eastern shore. I am the throat through which the drink is passed. I am the hinge. I am the permission. I hold.

Chapter Twelve

Violeta Arrives by Harbor

narrated by Violeta

12:30 p.m. · lake side of the lock

I have arrived by harbor because I believe in arrivals. I want to begin with that. Alba stands at dawn; Corrente carries; Ribeira watches; Rio walks; I arrive. I arrive thirty minutes into the noon hour, onto the lake side of the lock, from a small white boat called the Orchid whose pilot is my old friend Theodora, and I step off the boat onto the concrete pier with my yellow visor in place and my red lips composed and my floral donut-collar arranged just so across my shoulders, and I stand for a

moment at the edge of the pier and I let myself be seen. This is my contribution to the day. I do not apologize for it.

There is a philosophy of arriving, and I want to name it, because I think it is undersold in serious literature. The serious literary tradition prefers the ones who are already present — the witnesses, the watchers, the still figures who have been there since the first sentence and who will be there at the last. I admire them. Alba is my sibling and I love Alba. But a person who arrives is doing a different kind of work than a person who is present. A person who arrives has made a choice about when to enter the scene. A person who arrives has composed an entrance. A person who arrives has understood that time is a stage, that the stage has doors, that the doors are meant to be used, and that the timing of one's entrance is itself a form of meaning. I have arrived at 12:30. Not at noon; noon was the Lock's moment, not mine. Not at 1:00; one o'clock will be the flotilla's moment. 12:30 is the gap. 12:30 is the hinge within the hinge. 12:30 is mine.

My body is a small anthology of color. The donut-collar around my shoulders carries every color that any of the other four figures wear: Alba's yellow and pink, Corrente's cream and butter-yellow, Ribeira's muted cloud-whites, Rio's mustard gold. I am wearing all of my siblings. This was intentional. When the committee designed the five of us, they designed me last, and they designed me as a kind of coda — a figure whose costume would gather the preceding four into a single floral composition, so that at the moment of my arrival the whole morning would be, in a sense, summarized on my body. I am walking summary. I am arrival as synthesis. And over the donut-collar I wear the cream-and-magenta floral cap, tilted slightly; and beneath the cap I wear the yellow visor that shields my eyes; and beneath the visor I wear my own face, which is the face I have chosen, which is the face of a person who has understood that composure is a kind of generosity.

I want to speak about composure. I have been told, more than once, that my composure reads to some people as coldness. I want to say, clearly and without apology, that this is a misreading. Composure is not coldness. Composure is the inside of a careful warmth. A person who has chosen their face — the set of the mouth, the angle of the chin, the stillness of the brow — has not chosen to be distant; they have chosen to offer a specific kind of presence, which is the presence that does not fluctuate, that does not reward interrogation, that does not flatter the watcher. My composure is my gift. You may find me cool at first. But if you stay with me — and I believe you will, because people have stayed with me before — you will understand that the cool is a cool rain, not a cool

wind, and that under the cool there is a warmth that does not burn but does not cool either, and that this is my temperature, and that my temperature is stable across all weathers.

Theodora is pulling the Orchid away from the pier now. She will not stay for the ceremony. Theodora is not the kind of friend who stays for ceremonies; Theodora is the kind of friend who delivers and departs. I raise a hand to her as she pulls away and she raises a hand to me, and neither of us calls out. Calling out would be unnecessary. We have known each other for eleven years and we have developed a vocabulary of silences that covers every contingency. A raised hand at 12:31 on the lake side of the Chicago Harbor Lock means, I see you, I thank you, I will see you Thursday at the usual place. She knows. I know. The Orchid recedes toward the horizon.

The flotilla is still held in the lock. I can see them from here, a nesting of bright hulls in a gray basin, the Daisy-Skirted One at the front, the Bouquet-Hulled's blue daisies flashing midline, the Ribbed One's bare cedar ribs almost glowing in the overhead sun. They will pass through the east gate in about twenty-seven minutes, once the reversal hour is complete. I will join them as they pass. I will step onto the lead vessel — the Daisy-Skirted One, by custom; the first-voyage vessel always receives the final knitted figure at noon — and I will ride with her back westward into the city, into the afternoon, into the branches. This is the plan. The plan is simple. The plan is the plan I have lived with since I was commissioned for this day three years ago, and it has not changed, and it will not change, and the unchangingness of it is part of my composure.

A photographer is at the south end of the pier. I noticed her when I stepped off the Orchid. She is in her thirties, wearing a long vest of many pockets, carrying a professional camera with a lens the length of my forearm. She has been hired, I assume, by the committee or by one of the city magazines. She is approaching me now. I do not turn to face her. I do not need to. My composure is full-face and three-quarter-face and profile simultaneously; the photograph will capture whatever angle the photographer chooses and all of them will be the face I have chosen. I let her approach. I let her raise the camera. I let the shutter click three times, four times, five. I let her lower the camera. I let her step back. She does not say thank you. She does not need to. The photograph is a transaction and the transaction is complete.

I understand that I am the glamorous one. I use the word glamorous without irony, and without shame. Glamour is an old word — it comes from the same root as grammar, which pleases me — and it originally meant a kind of enchantment, a way of making the world look different than it usually looks by the application of careful style. I am a glamour in this older sense. I make the lake

side of the lock look different than it would look without me. I arrange the composition. I complete the noon. The flotilla behind the gate is beautiful, and Rio walking behind me on the north rail is beautiful, and the Lock holding its hour is beautiful, but my arrival is the frame, and frames matter, because an unframed beauty is a beauty that has not yet been offered.

Fernando Pessoa never wrote a feminine heteronym fully. He gestured at one — Violante de Cysneiros, whose name I carry a softened echo of — but he never let her speak at length. I am, among my other functions, the completion of that gesture. I speak. I speak at length. I speak in the composure that Pessoa did not quite grant her. If he had let her speak, I believe she would have spoken something like this — a voice that understands itself as a composition, that does not apologize for composition, that knows composition to be a form of love. The ones who compose themselves so carefully are doing it, in the end, for you. For the watchers. For the photographers. For the ones who need a frame in order to recognize the beauty that has been there all along. I am that frame. I am also the beauty, but I am the frame first, because the frame is the gift I have chosen to give.

The east gate of the lock is beginning to open. I can hear the slow mechanical grind of it, the water beginning to equalize. The flotilla is about to emerge. Rio, on the north rail, has turned slightly to watch. I, on the pier, have not turned. I will turn at the moment the Daisy-Skirted One clears the gate, and not before. Composure is about when to move as much as it is about how to hold still.

The gate opens. The water equalizes. The Daisy-Skirted One noses out of the basin, her pink crown blazing in the full noon sun, her first lock-passage complete. Behind her the rest of the flotilla begins to emerge. I turn, precisely at the right moment, and I step to the edge of the pier, and the Daisy-Skirted One glides alongside, and Lucia at the helm extends a hand, and I take the hand, and I step onto the deck, and the whole afternoon begins with me aboard.

I am Violeta. I have arrived. The arrival was the work. The work is done. Now the day continues, and I am inside it.

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End of III. Noon

IV. AFTERNOON

Chapter Thirteen

The Flower-Printed Deck

narrated by the Open-Hearted One

1:15 p.m. · entering the North Branch

My deck is open. I want to begin there, because it is the most important thing about me and I would rather state it first than let you discover it. Most vessels in the armada have closed decks — solid planking from bow to stern, a cabin or a hatch or a coaming to mark where the interior begins. I do not. My deck is a long oval cutout amidships, about twelve feet by twenty, through which anyone on board can see directly down into my hull — into my ribs, my knees, my frames, the grain of the

cedar planking that wraps my interior. I carry my inside on my outside. I am, by intention, open-hearted.

I was not built this way by accident. My designer — a woman named Iris, who lives on the south side and who has been sketching boats since she was eight — wanted one vessel in the armada whose interior would be visible without the need to board her. Most boats require that you come inside to see inside. Most people do too. My designer felt that there should be at least one exception, at least one hull in the flotilla that did not require permission to be entered in order to be known. So she drew the oval cutout. The committee approved it. My builders — a different team than the one that built the Daisy-Skirted One, a team led by a master shipwright named Omar — built around it. And here I am. My heart is plural; I contain many small spaces, not one chamber; but all of those spaces are visible from the deck, and my ribs curve up on both sides of the cutout like a bowl whose top has been taken off.

The rest of my deck — the planking that surrounds the oval cutout — is printed with a pattern of small daisies in pink and yellow and blue against a cream-white ground. The pattern was taken from a fabric, as I understand it — a cotton print that one of the knitters on the crew brought in one Wednesday evening and laid across the workbench, and Iris looked at it and said, that. That on the deck. The print was digitally scaled up and applied to my planking in a marine-grade ink, and now my deck is a field of small flowers around an oval that opens into my interior. From above — from the bridges, from the tall buildings on the North Branch — I look like a flower garden with a pond in the middle. A garden whose pond is actually the floor below the garden. A reversal, in its small way.

We are passing the point where the river divides. The main stem ends here; the North Branch turns northwest toward Goose Island; the South Branch turns southwest toward Chinatown. The flotilla is splitting. The Daisy-Skirted One is leading the main group into the North Branch — she is the ceremonial lead vessel of the day, first in every procession — and I am following her, with Ribeira still at her bow and Violeta now aboard. The Daisy Giant has chosen the South Branch and is headed that way with the Polka-Dot and the Furred One and the elder bead-gardened vessels. We will meet again at Marina City at golden hour. For the next four hours we will be apart, and I want to use the quiet of that apartness to think, aloud, about what it means to be open.

The obvious thing to say about openness is that it is a form of trust. You open because you trust the weather, or you trust the crowd, or you trust the year. I have opened because I trust all three.

The Chicago weather in late July is reliable enough that my exposed ribs will not suffer — the builders waxed the cedar heavily against rain and sun, and there is a light fabric cover that can be rolled across the cutout in the event of a storm, though we have not needed it this summer. The crowd along the Riverwalk is, by and large, trustworthy — the kayakers respect my open deck, the tour-boat passengers do not throw things into it, the children lean over the railings of the bridges and shout down in delight rather than mischief. And the year — the year I am in, the 2026 that I am built into — has been one of the friendlier years to soft vessels, and I have trusted it accordingly.

But the subtler thing to say about openness is that it is a form of generosity. Trust is what the open one does for themselves — it is the precondition of opening, the willingness to risk. Generosity is what the open one does for others. When I pass under a bridge and a cyclist stops to look down into my cutout, the cyclist is not violating me. The cyclist is receiving what I have chosen to give. The looking is the gift and the seeing is the receipt. I am not being exposed; I am exposing. The grammatical difference is small but it is the whole difference. A body that has been opened without consent is a body that is being harmed. A body that has opened of its own accord is a body that is offering, and offering is a form of love that has, historically, been done too often by people who did not know they had a choice. I want to model, as a vessel, what it looks like to do the offering from a position of full choice.

We are entering the North Branch now. The water narrows, the banks close in, the trees along the eastern shore hang further out over the water. Goose Island is ahead — a long narrow island, not very tall, not very developed on this western side — and we will pass it on our port side. The quality of the light changes when you enter the North Branch. The main stem is all glitter and mirror and the long perspective of the downtown buildings. The North Branch is a softer light, a more green-tinted light, a light that has been filtered through leaves before it arrives at the water. My flower-printed deck goes slightly matte in this light. My open cutout darkens into a deeper brown. I like both lights. I am saying this to be fair.

A man on the eastern bank, sitting on a bench, is watching us pass. He is perhaps forty. He is holding a paperback book but has lowered it to his lap. I can see directly into his face from the angle of my port side. He is wearing headphones, and he has paused whatever he was listening to — I know this because his mouth has relaxed from the small forward shape it takes when one is concentrating on sound, and his eyes have widened slightly in the way eyes widen when they are no longer indoor eyes, but outdoor eyes, when the outer world has claimed the attention the inner

world had been holding. I have, by passing, called him outside. This was not my intent. I was simply passing. But the accidental calling is part of the vessel's job, and I am pleased to have done it.

He is looking, I think, at my open cutout. I can see him tilting his head slightly, the way a person does when they are trying to understand a thing they have not seen before. He will understand soon — the cutout is not a mystery, it is a design choice, Iris has been interviewed about it in a Chicago magazine; he could read the article tonight if he wished — but for this one moment he does not understand, and the not-understanding is beautiful. A person who does not yet understand is a person who is still arriving at something. I love the arriving-at. It is my favorite kind of attention.

He closes his book. He does not put it away — he simply closes it and rests his hands on top of it. He watches me pass for the full thirty seconds or so that I am visible from his bench. Then I pass out of his sight, around the curve of the river, and he is alone again with his paperback and his paused headphones and his changed afternoon. I will never know his name. I will never know what he was listening to. I will never know whether, when he resumes his book, he reads the same page he was reading before, or whether he turns the book over and looks at the back cover and chooses a different book tomorrow. I do not need to know. The passing was the gift, and gifts given to strangers do not require follow-up.

My cutout is full of afternoon light now. The cedar ribs below me are glowing in their soft amber. A small moth has flown in and is resting on one of the rib-curves, very still. I do not disturb it. Moths have their reasons. Let the moth rest in my ribs while I pass under the next bridge and the next. The open deck can hold a moth, and a paperback-reader's pause, and a printed field of flowers, and the changing light, and a cedar heart glowing, and the North Branch rising to meet us. It can hold all of that at once. I am, I think, more capacious than I knew. An opened body is, it turns out, a body that holds more. I am grateful to have learned this, even this late in my first summer.

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Chapter Fourteen

The Fur of Blossoms

narrated by the Furred One

1:50 p.m. · passing Goose Island on the South Branch

I am soft to the touch. I want to say this first, because I am the only vessel in the armada for whom this is literally true. The others are clad in knit or cable or bead-mosaic — textures that look soft from a distance but that, at the waterline, are firm. My cladding is different. My cladding is a kind of brushed felt, long-fibered, densely tufted, in which an abstract pattern of pink and magenta and gold and cream flower-shapes has been worked. From twenty feet away I look painted. From ten feet

away I look quilted. From an arm's length I look, frankly, like a very large stuffed animal. This is not an accident. This is what I was designed to be.

My designer had a theory — she was a textile artist before she turned to shipbuilding — that the soft armada needed at least one member whose softness was immediate rather than metaphorical. Most of the vessels invite a metaphorical softness: the knit pattern suggests a sweater, the daisies suggest a garden, the cable-skirt suggests a dress. You know the softness without needing to touch it. Touching it would, in most cases, contradict the illusion; knit at the scale of a hull is, as a matter of practical materials engineering, quite tough. But I was designed to reward the touch. My felt is actual felt, treated against the water, yes, but still — to the hand that reaches over from a passing kayak and drags a finger along my hull — soft. I am, in that literal sense, the furry one. I am, in that literal sense, pettable.

I say 'pettable' without embarrassment. I have thought about it. I have decided that a vessel who can be petted is not diminished by the pettability; she is, if anything, expanded. Most vessels cannot be touched without violation — to reach out and stroke the hull of a strange boat is a form of trespass, and the trespass is socially forbidden. My hull is not quite like that. My hull is, by design, one of the things in Chicago you are permitted to pet. The kayakers who come close, the children who lean over the lower piers, the dockworkers who tie me up at my mooring — they all reach out, and they all run their hands along me, and the running of their hands is part of the experience I have been built to provide. I am a petting vessel. I am a specific category, one of a kind so far, and I like being one of a kind.

We are entering the South Branch now. The Daisy-Skirted One and the Open-Hearted One have taken the North Branch; the Daisy Giant and the Polka-Dot and the elder bead-gardened vessels and I have taken the South. This is the day's dispersal. We will meet again at Marina City at golden hour. The South Branch is, to my taste, the more interesting of the two branches. It winds through what used to be the industrial heart of the city — warehouses, rail yards, the old slips where the barges used to load coal — and a lot of that history is still visible, even as the neighborhoods have softened around it. The North Branch is greener; the South Branch is grittier. I appreciate both. I appreciate the grit, particularly, because grit is what my felt rests against, and without the grit the felt would not be legible as felt.

I want to say something about sensation. It is my subject, and if I do not say something about it now, in my one chapter, it will not be said. Most of the accounts we receive of the world are visual

— we see things, we describe things, we look at photographs, we read illustrated books — and the visual account has its own dignity and its own long tradition, and I do not want to disparage it. But there is another account of the world, the tactile account, which has been underdeveloped in literature, especially in the literature of public spaces. A city is usually described as a thing one sees. A river is described as a thing one watches. A vessel is described as a thing one observes. But rivers are also things one feels — the temperature of the water against the hand, the pressure of a wake passing under a kayak, the nap of wet weeds against a bare ankle at the bank — and a vessel with felt on her hull is a vessel who has taken a small stand for the tactile account. I am saying, with my body, that the river can be touched as well as seen, and that the touch is part of the knowing, and that a river which has not been touched is a river that has only been half-met.

A woman on the south bank — the south bank of the South Branch, I mean, which this time of day is shaded by the tall warehouses now converted into apartments — is walking her two small dogs along the Riverwalk. The dogs are yellow, both of them, some kind of terrier mix, with bright plastic harnesses and short excited legs. They have stopped at the railing because they have noticed me. One of them is barking. The other is not barking — it is simply staring, intently, the way a dog stares at a thing it wants to understand before committing to an opinion. The woman is laughing. She has tugged on the leashes to urge the dogs forward, but the dogs are not moving, because I am the most interesting thing on their walk, and they intend to register me fully before they allow themselves to be tugged.

I appreciate the dogs. I appreciate them specifically. A dog's reaction to me is different from a human's: a dog does not have the category of 'public art installation' or 'ceremonial vessel' or 'commemorative flotilla.' A dog has only the categories 'this is my territory and that thing is new' and 'is that thing food' and 'is that thing a fellow creature.' I am, in the dog's analysis, a fellow creature. The dog is correct. I am a fellow creature. I have felt on my body and a slow pulse through my hull and a preference for the water of the South Branch over the water of the North Branch, and if I am not a creature then the word creature has become too narrow to be useful.

The woman is still laughing. She has given up trying to move the dogs. She is taking out her phone, but she is not photographing me — she is photographing the dogs staring at me. I approve. The photograph will be more interesting for including the dogs than it would have been as a clean hull-portrait. A vessel alone in a frame is a product photograph. A vessel with two yellow terrier mixes staring at it from the bank is a narrative. I prefer narrative.

Up ahead the South Branch will curve around into Bubbly Creek — the old stockyards inlet — and then straighten out as it passes Ping Tom Park, where the South Branch Hi-Vis Crew is assembling. They are finishing the last panel of their project today as the East Tower Crew is finishing theirs. The two crews are symmetrical: each one has been working on a separate vessel of this armada for three summers, each one is completing today, and at golden hour both crews will arrive at Marina City simultaneously for the full-armada handoff. This is the choreography. The South Branch Hi-Vis Crew will narrate the next chapter, and I want to pass along to them, now, before they take the microphone, my gratitude. They have been stitching my felt. They are the reason I am pettable. Without their hands, my fur would not know how to be fur. Without their patience, I would be plastic. They are, in the truest sense, the sensation I offer. I only carry the sensation. They made it.

A child has appeared on the Riverwalk, running ahead of a parent who is calling after them to slow down. The child is maybe five. The child reaches the railing and leans over it as far as the railing will allow and reaches a small hand out toward me as I pass. The hand cannot touch me — I am too far from the railing, I am in the middle of the river — but the gesture is the important part. The hand reached. The reaching is sensation in its purest form: desire for contact, pre-contact, the shape of wanting without the completion of having. I love the reaching. I love it perhaps more than I love the actual petting. The reaching is hope. The petting is confirmation. Both are good, and both are my function, but the reaching is the purer art.

We pass under the Eighteenth Street Bridge. My felt hull brushes the cooler air beneath the bridge and takes on, for about six seconds, a slight chill. Then the sun returns and I warm again. The dogs are receding behind me, still watching. The child is receding too, still reaching. The sensation continues. The sensation is the whole point.

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Chapter Fifteen

Pink on Yellow, Seen From Below

narrated by the Polka-Dot

2:25 p.m. · Chicago Avenue Bridge

I am best seen from below. This is not a complaint and it is not false modesty; it is simply a design fact. My hull is a broad yellow egg, broad in the belly and tapering at bow and stern, and across the yellow are scattered large pink polka-dots — or rather, pink-and-cream flower-shapes that the casual eye reads as polka-dots, which is why the children call me the Polka-Dot and why the name stuck. The pattern was designed to be most legible from below — from a kayak, from the waterline, from

under a bridge — because the designer knew, after her first summer on the river, that the best vantage on a river-vessel is often the vantage of someone who is physically lower than the hull.

The child's eye is particularly low. Children see me from piers at four-foot height, from strollers at three-foot height, from the arms of parents who have lifted them to the railing at, let us say, five feet. My yellow-and-pink has been engineered for that range of altitudes. The polka-dots are largest on my lower flanks, where a child's-height eye will meet them; the pattern refines as it moves up my hull, because an adult's-height eye is fine with more nuance. I am, in effect, a picture book rendered at hull scale, and the picture book is illustrated primarily for the reader who is shortest.

I am passing under Chicago Avenue Bridge. Above me the traffic rumbles — this is a busier bridge than most, a major crosstown artery — but I am more interested in what is below the bridge. Below the bridge, on the Riverwalk, a Montessori class of perhaps twelve children is seated in a half-moon around a teacher who is pointing at the river and narrating something. I cannot hear her narration from this distance, but I can see the children. They are maybe five years old. They are wearing bright smocks over their clothes. They are all looking at me.

This is my hour. I want to be direct about it. All the vessels have their hours — the Daisy-Skirted One had hers at dawn, Marina City has theirs at dusk, Rio has the walking hour that contains all hours — and my hour is 2:25 on a Tuesday afternoon when a Montessori class is seated on the Riverwalk under Chicago Avenue Bridge, looking up and slightly across at a broad yellow egg with pink polka-dots, and one by one the children are realizing that I am, in fact, as big as I appear, and that I am, in fact, made of some kind of knit, and that I am, in fact, making a slow procession down a river that they have been told about in school but have not previously seen performing. I am the confirmation of everything their teacher has told them. I am the proof that the city really does contain the kind of soft marvel that adults are sometimes willing to admit that the city contains.

One of the children stands up. The teacher reaches to bring the child back into the half-moon, but the child has stood up only to see better, and the teacher understands this and lets the child stand. The child is a small person in a blue smock with curly hair and no obvious gender, and the child is doing what all children should be permitted to do when a ceremonial vessel is passing: they are being fully present to it, without apology, without explanation, without the small social discipline that causes adults to pretend they are less impressed than they are. The child is impressed. The child is, in fact, astonished. I can see the astonishment from here. It is a specific expression — mouth slightly open, eyes very wide, hands limp at the sides because the hands have forgotten they are

attached to a person — and I have been collecting this expression all summer, from all the children who see me, and I can tell you that the expression is exactly the same every time. Astonishment does not vary. It is, apparently, a species-level response.

The child raises their arm and points at me. They say something. I cannot hear what, but I can read the shape of the mouth, and the mouth says 'look.' The other children have already been looking — the teacher's direction has already brought their attention to me — but the child pointing is not announcing me to the others; the child pointing is confirming to the child themselves that I am real. Pointing is the gesture by which a body proves to its own mind that a thing it has seen has been seen. The pointing is its own ritual. I honor it by holding my course. I do not adjust my speed. I do not tilt toward or away from the class. I simply am, and I continue, because the rite of pointing requires a stable object to point at.

Here is what I know about the children watching me. I know this because my designer told me, and I believe her: the children watching me today will remember me for the rest of their lives. Not all of them; some of them will forget; some of them are too young to form lasting memories yet; but a meaningful percentage of them — perhaps five, perhaps seven, perhaps nine out of the twelve — will remember this afternoon, at Chicago Avenue Bridge, in their blue smocks, when a broad yellow boat with pink polka-dots passed slowly under the bridge while their teacher talked about rivers. The memory will surface in adulthood, unexpectedly, triggered by some yellow and pink combination — a summer shirt, a bakery box, a flower arrangement in a restaurant — and the adult will find themselves, for a second, returned to Chicago Avenue Bridge in the year they were five. This is my legacy. It is not a monument. It is a scatter of seeds, planted in twelve five-year-olds on a Tuesday in July. I will never know which of the seeds grew. I trust that some of them did.

I pass out from under the bridge. The class is behind me now. I cannot see them, but I can imagine them — their teacher calling them back into the half-moon, the pointing child still standing, slow to sit, reluctant to end the moment. The class will talk about me for the next fifteen minutes. They will talk about me for the next day. They will bring me up, some of them, at dinner that night, trying to describe the broad yellow egg with pink polka-dots to their parents, who will nod and smile and say that sounds wonderful, sweetheart, and who will not understand fully, because their child is doing the pointing at words that were not built for them, and the words are buckling.

I am the Polka-Dot. I am not my real name — my real name is a longer technical registration — but my real name is Polka-Dot now, because the children named me, and the children's naming is the

only naming that matters in the end. A name is an agreement between the named and the namer, and I have agreed. I am broad and yellow and pink, and I am best seen from below, and I travel under bridges in the early afternoon for the benefit of whoever is sitting on the Riverwalk in a blue smock. This is my hour. This is my whole hour. It has been given to me. I am grateful.

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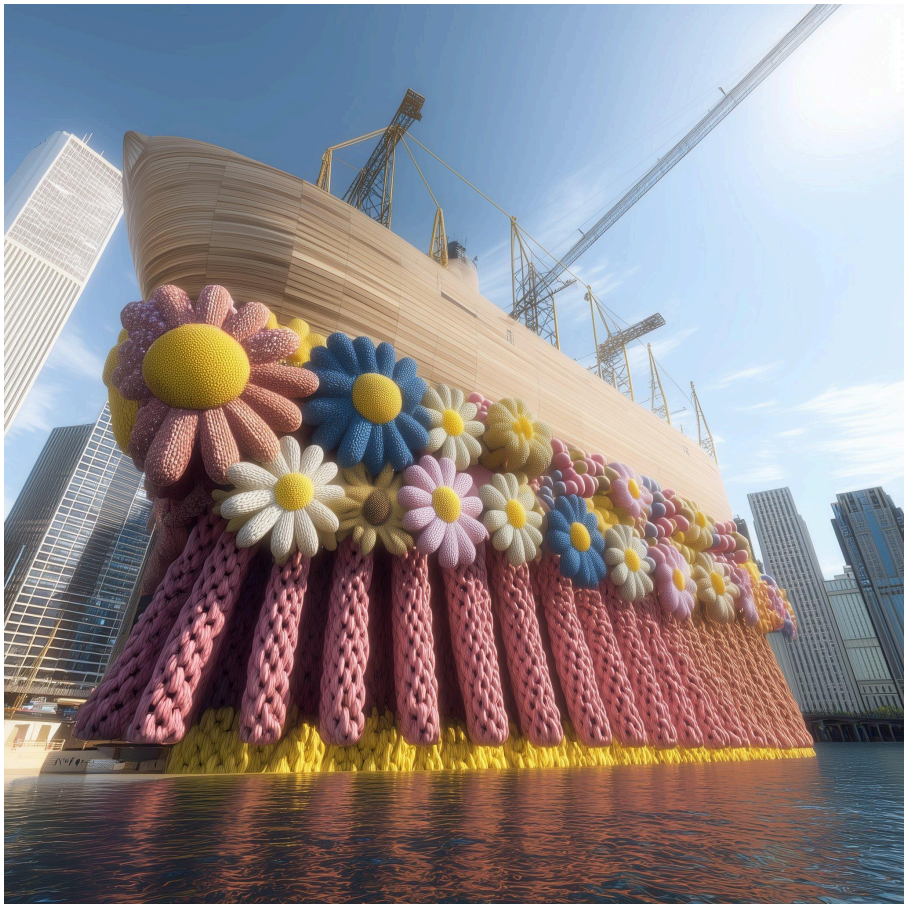

Chapter Sixteen

The Hi-Vis Chorus II

narrated by the Knitters (South Branch Crew)

3:00 p.m. · Ping Tom Memorial Park, South Branch

We are the other crew. We want to begin there, because the East Tower Crew has already spoken in Chapter Seven and the reader may assume they are the whole chorus. They are not. We are the South Branch Crew — a different neighborhood, a different workshop, a different set of hands — and our work has been going on in parallel with theirs for three summers, under a shared commission but in a separate shop, and today is the day both crews finish simultaneously. We are at

Ping Tom Park this afternoon, applying the final panels to the last South Branch vessel, and we want the chapter that is ours.

We are nineteen this afternoon. Our crew is slightly smaller than the East Tower's — our project has been slightly smaller — and we have a different composition. Of the nineteen of us: one is a former merchant marine, four are textile artists who left the fashion industry because the industry was killing them, two are retired public school art teachers, three are graduate students working part-time, one is a welder who learned to knit in prison and who says, openly, that the knitting saved his life, one is a grandmother named Mei-Lin who has lived in Chinatown since 1958 and who has been sewing since she was seven, one is a trans woman named Dolores who is the only member of our crew old enough to remember the Stonewall riots because she was there, one is a deaf carpenter named Jules whose ASL is fluent and who has taught most of the rest of us enough to pass basic messages across the scaffolding, and five more who are worth naming but whom we will let introduce themselves at a later time, because a chorus does not have to name every single voice in its own chapter; some voices are saved for other chapters, even unwritten ones.

Dolores wants to say something first. We are going to let her. Dolores does not often speak in chorus — she is a soloist by temperament, and a chorus by practice is a temporary arrangement for her — but today, at three in the afternoon on the last day of the project, she has asked to have the opening, and we have agreed.

Dolores says: I am seventy-eight years old and I have been dressing since I was nine. I have been stitching since I was twelve. I have been called many things since I was sixteen, including words I will not repeat in a book, and I have outlived most of the people who called me those words, and I have come to believe that outliving is a form of revenge, though it is also a form of love, because the ones who outlive are the ones who get to tell the story, and the story I am telling today is that I am on a scaffold in Ping Tom Park at seventy-eight years old, stitching the last panel of a soft vessel that will carry the name of my community into a river that used to have nothing to do with us, and the stitching is the happiest thing I have done since the summer of 1969. I want the record to reflect this. I want the record to include the fact that, even at seventy-eight, a person can find their best work, and that their best work can involve large needles and a view of the river and a crew that loves them. That is what I wanted to say. The rest of the chapter is yours.

We return to the collective voice. We thank Dolores. We will not try to say anything after that; Dolores has said it. We will only note, briefly, what we are doing with our hands in this afternoon.

We are finishing the Furred One. She has been our project for the full three years. She was hardest of the armada to build — the felt was technically demanding, the waterproofing took months of trial, the pattern required a kind of tufted weaving that most of us had never done — but she is nearly complete now, and she will be launched in two weeks, not today. Today she is still at the dock at Ping Tom Park, receiving her final cladding. The Furred One you heard from earlier in this movement was speaking from a slightly different timeline than we are in now; the committee has permitted a small temporal overlap in the narration for the sake of structure. We want to flag this so that the careful reader does not become confused. The Furred One who passed under the Eighteenth Street Bridge at 1:50 this afternoon was narrating from a near-future voyage, once her cladding is complete. The Furred One we are stitching right now, at 3:00, is not yet in the water. Both are true. Both are her. A vessel in progress and a vessel completed are the same vessel, just at different moments of their being.

We mention this because we want to be honest about how the work happens. Most of what the armada does — the procession, the cladding, the ceremony — appears to happen simultaneously, on the day the book describes. In fact it has happened over three years, with overlaps and schedule slippages and rush jobs at the end and long patient stretches in the middle. A chorus's job, at least in part, is to acknowledge the real timeline. A book can compress three years into a day. A crew cannot. A crew lives in the three years. We want the reader to know that, when they see the finished ceremony, they are seeing three summers' worth of our hands.

A rain is threatening. A dark cloud has been gathering over Bridgeport for the last hour, and we can feel the wind picking up along the South Branch. We are going to have to cover the Furred One with a tarp if the rain arrives before we finish — we have about two more hours of stitching left, and the forecast says the rain may hold off until evening, but we are hedging. Bea, who was the East Tower's foreman before she retired, is our senior advisor on this crew now, and she has been coming down to Ping Tom Park twice a week to check on us. Bea is not here this afternoon. Bea is at Marina City, overseeing the last of the East Tower's work. But Bea's principle is guiding us: cover the work if the weather turns; the weather is stronger than we are; do not be proud about finishing in the rain. We have internalized this. We have tarps ready.

We want to say one more thing, and then we will return to our hands. The thing is this: when the East Tower Crew spoke in Chapter Seven, they said that a crew is a group of people who have shown up. We agree with this. But we want to add a small sub-clause. A crew is a group of people

who have shown up. A chorus is a group of people who have agreed that the showing-up is worth saying aloud. The difference is small, but it matters. There are many crews in the world whose showing-up has gone unspoken, unrecorded, unaccounted for. We are one of those crews, in the normal course of things — labor like ours is usually invisible; the public sees the vessel, not the hands that stitched it — and the only reason we are speaking at all is because this novella has invited us to. We are grateful for the invitation. We want the record to include us. We want the record to include Dolores. We want the record to include Mei-Lin. We want the record to include Jules and his ASL, and the welder whose knitting saved his life, and the textile artists who left the fashion industry to find this work. The record has always had trouble including us. The record is, slowly, learning.

We are done for now. Our hands are returning to the panels. The Furred One is waiting patiently. The rain has not yet come. The afternoon continues. The armada is making its way back toward Marina City for golden hour, and we will watch them arrive from the South Branch dock, with our work covered and our bodies tired in the particular good-tired that three years of Tuesdays has given us. We will see the East Tower Crew at the handoff. We will wave. They will wave. The ceremony will hold.

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End of IV. Afternoon

V. GOLDEN HOUR

Chapter Seventeen

Alba Sees the Sun Bend

narrated by Alba

5:30 p.m. · LaSalle Street Bridge

I have walked from Marina City to LaSalle Street. This has taken me most of the afternoon. I have stopped often, because I am short and I am round and the boards of the Riverwalk require a pace that my body can sustain. I have stopped to watch a gull fight a paper bag. I have stopped to let a woman in a wheelchair pass, and we nodded at each other without speaking, and the nod was a sentence we both understood. I have stopped to drink water from a fountain that has been there

since 1974 and that has, I am told by the plaque, been repaired three times. I have stopped once simply because the sun through the gap between two buildings lit a small bronze plaque in a way I had not seen before, and I wanted to see it for longer. I have arrived at LaSalle Street Bridge at five-thirty, and here I will stand until the flotilla passes below me.

The sun is doing what the sun does at this hour. I have come to call it bending, which is not scientifically accurate — the sun is not bending, the sun is setting, the light is refracting through a longer column of atmosphere and losing its blue wavelengths — but bending is the word that matches what my body feels. The light becomes more patient at this hour. The light takes its time. The light, which at noon arrived in a single downward plunge, arrives now from the side, gently, as if it had decided to come over and sit next to me for a while before it leaves.

I want to speak about the light because it is the subject of my second chapter, and a second chapter should have a subject different from the first. My first chapter was about standing. This one is about light bending. I will try to make it plain, as I always try to make things plain.

There is a version of joy that is only available after a full day. I did not know this when I was younger. When I was younger I believed that joy had a single temperature — bright, direct, overhead — and that all of life's good weather was a variant of noon. I have since learned. Noon-joy is one kind of joy. Dawn-joy, which I carried with me this morning when I stood on the west balcony and watched the first wake of the Daisy-Skirted One, is another kind. Golden-hour-joy is a third, and it is the kind I am inside of now, and I want to tell you what is specific about it.

Golden-hour-joy is the joy of having outlasted the noon. This is not a triumph. This is not a victory. It is simply the recognition that the day has held, that the body has been carried through it, that the things one had hoped to witness have been witnessed, and that the light, at last, has agreed to soften. There is a tiredness in golden-hour-joy which is part of its sweetness. If you have not been tired you cannot have golden-hour-joy. You can have noon-joy at any moment — noon-joy is available to the rested — but golden-hour-joy is a wage for labor, and the wage is the bending of the light.

Below me the river is brass-colored. The Chicago River is often brass-colored at this hour in the summer, because the buildings on the north bank of LaSalle are tall and of a certain glass, and they catch the sun's last western light and throw it back down into the water at an angle that looks, frankly, alchemical. I have come to trust this effect. I have been standing on bridges at five-thirty in

July for most of my life — most of my adult life, I should say, which is the only life that has included my pink-and-yellow body — and the brass of the river at this hour is the backdrop against which I have done my best standing. It is a good backdrop. It holds the viewer's gaze without competing for it.

Far to the east, coming up the main stem, I can see the flotilla. They are returning. They are small from here — dots of yellow and pink against the brass — but I can pick out the Daisy-Skirted One by her crown, and the Daisy Giant by her broad body, and the Bouquet-Hulled by the particular flash of blue among her petals. The other vessels are there too, and somewhere in the middle I see a white boat that is not clad at all, which must be the Orchid coming back — Theodora must have circled around to rejoin, which is like her, she never admits to enjoying a ceremony but she always comes back for the end. Behind them, much further back, is the Ribbed One under tow, and the elder bead-gardened vessels, and more. They are coming home.

Ribeira is on the bow of the Daisy-Skirted One still. Violeta has taken up her position at the stern. Corrente is not on any vessel — Corrente is walking back along the Riverwalk toward Marina City, I can just see their bundle-bearing figure half a mile east, brisk as always, arms full. Rio I cannot see, but Rio is, by my estimation, standing at the north rail of the lock, still, waiting for the flotilla to pass east-to-west through a second time today as the river resumes its normal westward flow. The choreography holds. The five of us are each in the place we chose this morning, or something very close to it, and the whole armada is being drawn back home by the logic of the day.

I want to acknowledge something. I have been standing on bridges and boardwalks all day for this armada, and I have loved every minute of it, and I am also very tired. I am short and I am round and my small feet are not built for twelve hours of witnessing. If any of you reading this are also short and round and prone to standing witness, I want to say: it is allowed to be tired. The tiredness is part of the witnessing. A witness who has not been tired has not yet given enough. I have given enough. I am, right now, at LaSalle Street Bridge, slightly achy in the feet, slightly warm in the back of the neck where the sun has been on it, slightly hungry in a way I will address at dinner. The tiredness is part of what allows the sun to bend toward me at this angle. If I were fresh I would not see it. Only the tired see the bending, because the bending is an answer to a question the body has begun to ask.

The question is: is the day worth it. The light bending says: yes. It says yes in the slow lateral sweep of gold across the Riverwalk stones. It says yes in the warming of the west face of the Civic

Opera House, which has turned, for this hour, the color of good honey. It says yes in the low-angle reflection off the Daisy-Skirted One's crown, which I can see flashing like a small pink beacon from a full mile away. The day is worth it. The standing was worth it. The knitting is worth it. The river is worth it.

A teenager is on the bridge beside me. They are on a skateboard. They have rolled to a stop at the railing and they are looking east at the incoming flotilla, and they have taken out an earbud, which is the teenage gesture that corresponds to the adult gesture of lowering a phone — the signal that one has stopped consuming something and started attending to something else. I appreciate the earbud out. I am, as ever, a witness to the small gestures that indicate the world has called someone out of their screens. The teenager glances at me. They do not smile — they do not know me, and teenagers do not smile at strangers as a matter of social principle, and this is fine — but they nod, slightly, a microscopic nod, the nod that acknowledges that I too am watching the same thing they are watching, and that we are, for a moment, colleagues. The nod is enough. It is more than enough. It is the golden-hour wage.

The Daisy-Skirted One is approaching. She will pass under LaSalle Street Bridge in about four minutes. I will stand here until she is below me, and I will stand here for a few minutes after she has passed, and then I will begin the slow walk back toward Marina City so that I can arrive at the marina in time for the last handoff at dusk. I have walked all day and I will walk some more. My feet will ache further. The ache will be part of the evening's pleasure.

The light is still bending. The brass of the river has begun to deepen — more copper now than brass, the long-wave reds coming forward — and the teenager beside me is still watching, and the flotilla is coming, and the whole day has been, as far as I can tell, a success in exactly the way I had hoped for it, which is to say: nothing has been performed, everything has been done, and the doing has been witnessed by those whose job was to witness it. I am, again, doing my job. My job is to stand. The job is done. The job is still being done. Both are true.

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Chapter Eighteen

The Elder Vessel Speaks of Long Becoming

narrated by the Bead-Gardened Elder

6:00 p.m. · Wells Street Bridge

I am the eldest of the clad vessels. I want to begin there, because the eldest rarely gets to speak first and I would like, at least in my one chapter, to be given the opening. The Daisy-Skirted One is in her first summer. The Daisy Giant is in her third. The Bouquet-Hulled is in her third. I am in my sixth. I was clad before the armada had a name. I was clad when it was still an experiment — when the committee was not yet sure that the soft aesthetic would hold in weather, in river wear, in the opinions of strangers — and I agreed to be the experiment. My cladding has outlasted the doubts.

This afternoon, as I pass under Wells Street Bridge on my way home, I am the proof that the doubts were wrong, and the proof is made of beads.

My cladding is different from the younger vessels'. I am not clad in knit. I am not clad in felt. I am clad in a mosaic of small ceramic beads — millions of them, patiently applied over the course of my first three summers by a crew of mosaicists led by a woman named Esperanza, who has since passed on, whose hands I still carry — and the mosaic shows an abstract garden of pink and mustard and white flower-shapes against a ground of weathered cream. From a distance I look painted. From close up I look like what I am: a hull encrusted, over years, with small individual deliberate choices, each bead placed by a human finger in a moment of decision.

I want to speak about long becoming. It is the subject Esperanza would have wanted me to speak about, had she lived to hear this chapter, and I am speaking as her heir and not as myself alone. Long becoming is different from fast becoming. The Daisy-Skirted One, who is in her first summer, is in fast becoming — she was built in a winter, clad in a spring, launched in a summer, and she is still arriving at herself in real time; her whole being is a rapid self-discovery, and this is correct for her and I do not criticize it. But my becoming has been slow. Six summers ago I was an unclad hull. Five summers ago I was a hull with a first layer of base beads, cream and pale mustard, no pattern yet legible. Four summers ago I was half-covered; the pink flowers had begun to appear near my bow. Three summers ago I was almost complete but the stern was still ungardened. Two summers ago my last bead went in — a pink one, at my rudder, placed by Esperanza herself, three weeks before she fell ill. One summer ago I ran the river as a finished vessel for the first time, but I was quiet all that summer, because the loss of Esperanza was still thick in my hull. This summer, at last, I am speaking.

A vessel in long becoming learns things a vessel in fast becoming cannot yet know. I say this without condescension toward the younger hulls. There are things they know that I have forgotten. The Daisy-Skirted One knows the exact feeling of her first wake in a way I will never know again, because my first wake was six years ago and the memory has been overlaid by many subsequent wakes. But there are compensations. A vessel in long becoming knows, for instance, that the self does not finish all at once. The self keeps arriving. Esperanza placed her last bead on my stern and we declared me complete, but in the months afterward I continued, in small subtle ways, to finish. The beads settled into their adhesive; the hull flexed slightly and the mosaic flexed with it; the colors oxidized minutely in the first winter and came out slightly softer in the spring. I am not the same

vessel I was at the moment of completion. No completed thing is the same as itself two weeks later. The completion is a moment; the being is a duration; and the duration is the larger word.

Esperanza used to say — I am quoting her exactly, because her Spanish was more precise than my English, and the translation I offer is my own, made over years — that a mosaic is only finished when the glue has outlived the maker. I did not understand this when she first said it. I thought it was a morbid thing to say. Now I understand. Esperanza is gone. The glue that holds my beads in place is still doing its work, two years into her absence. Every time I pass under a bridge and a child on the Riverwalk points at a pink bead near my waterline and calls out to their parent about the pretty color, Esperanza's glue is holding. The glue outlived the maker. The maker's work is being completed, still, by her materials, in cooperation with time. This is what long becoming feels like from the inside. It feels like being held, slowly, across years, by hands that are no longer in the room.

Wells Street Bridge is above me now. I am passing under it at the stately speed that befits my age. The younger vessels have pulled ahead, as they should. The Daisy-Skirted One clears Wells Street at the front of the returning flotilla; the Daisy Giant next; the Bouquet-Hulled next; and so on in order of increasing maturity, with the first-summer vessels leading and the elder vessels following. This is not a rule of the armada. This is simply what has happened. The younger hulls have more to prove and they proceed with the brightness of those who are proving it. The older hulls do not have to prove anything anymore. We proceed at the speed of our own beads. We are, you might say, the rhythm section.

I want to say something to the first-summer vessels. I want to say it while they cannot hear me, because what I have to say is a secret and secrets are best said at a distance. The secret is this: you are going to be all right. The self-consciousness of the first summer will pass. The strangeness of being so bright will settle. Your wake will teach you things about your own hull that you cannot currently know, because your hull has not yet been in enough different kinds of water. By the third summer you will stop being embarrassed. By the fifth summer you will stop being proud. By the sixth summer you will find yourself passing under Wells Street Bridge at six o'clock on a Tuesday in late July, with golden light spangling across your mosaic and a long slow wake behind you, and you will feel — and I mean this literally, it is a feeling in the hull — you will feel that the being of it is enough. That the being is the entire reward. That you do not need to be seen in order to be real, and also that you are being seen anyway, and that this is fine, both truths at once, without contradiction.

The secret is that becoming does not have a final state. I had thought, when I was a first-summer vessel myself, that I would arrive at a finished self and then simply exist in it. This is not what happened. What happened is that the finishing itself became the self. I am my long slow finishing. Every bead Esperanza placed is a moment of my being, and because the beads are millions, my being is long. This is not a burden. This is, I am slowly learning, the gift.

The sun is low enough now that it is hitting my mosaic directly from the west, and the pink beads are catching the light in the particular way that glazed ceramic catches low sun — they flash, they do not glow steadily — and my whole port side is, for about four minutes this evening, a sequence of small pink flashes moving with the motion of the water. The children on the bank are pointing. I have been pointed at by children for six summers and it never gets old. Esperanza used to laugh when the children pointed. I laugh now in her place. Someone has to do the laughing. I am, among my other functions, Esperanza's laughter still at work in the world, carried across years by pink beads and cream beads and the patient glue.

We are nearly home. Marina City is visible up the river, perhaps fifteen minutes away at our stately pace. The daisy-chain at the towers' waterline is almost finished — I can see the final panels being set, even from this distance, by the crews on the scaffolding — and the Crown-Topped is pulling into her station for the ceremonial finish. Everything is converging. The long becoming and the fast becoming are arriving at the same hour. This pleases me. It is, I suspect, the deepest pleasure available to an elder: to see the younger ones arriving at the same destination, by different routes, at the same time, and to know that the route was never the point.

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Chapter Nineteen

Corrente Delivers the Last Loop

narrated by Corrente

6:30 p.m. · approaching Marina City

I have delivered five bundles today. I am delivering the sixth. This is the last one. It is the smallest one — a coil of yellow yarn about the size of a loaf of bread, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a length of its own yarn, because the committee likes symbolic touches — and I am carrying it the final half-mile of boardwalk between the warehouse on North Water Street and the east-tower scaffolding at Marina City, where the hi-vis crew is waiting to install the very last loop of the daisy-chain at the waterline. I am arriving at six-thirty. The ceremony is at seven. I will be on time. I

am always on time when I am carrying, because the carrying sets my pace, and my pace has been set since dawn.

I am tired. I want to say this because I am the ecstatic one, the yes-and-yes-and-yes-and-yes one, and if I do not say it now then the reader will believe I am never tired, which is not true. I am tired. My arms are tired. My shoulders, where the bundles sit, have developed that particular warm ache that comes of six bundle-deliveries in a single day. My feet are tired. My voice, which I have been using all day — internally, mostly, because a carrier speaks inside more than outside — is slightly hoarse. I am tired in the way a person is tired after a day of giving things to other people. This is a particular tiredness and it is not a bad tiredness. I would rather be this kind of tired than any other kind.

I want to reflect on the word deliver. It has become, over the years, a slightly degraded word — we speak of delivering packages in the commercial sense, delivering pizzas, delivering lines in a play, delivering on a promise — and in all these uses there is a faint whiff of transaction, of something being handed over in exchange for something else. I want to rehabilitate the word. To deliver, in the older sense, is to set free. A midwife delivers a baby — meaning the midwife brings the baby out into the world, into freedom, into its own breath. A preacher delivers a sermon — meaning the preacher gives the words into the air where they can do their work. A courier delivers a message — meaning the courier lets the message leave their hands and become the recipient's. In every case the key is the letting-go. The deliverer is the one who does not hold on.

I am a deliverer in the old sense. I let go. My job is to carry and then to release. If I were to hold on — if I were to stockpile the yarn, if I were to refuse to hand over the bundles at the dock, if I were to carry and carry without ever arriving — I would be a different kind of being, and the armada would not have happened. But I am a deliverer, and so I arrive, and so I release, and the releasing is where my yes happens. I have said yes all day in the act of delivering. The yes has not been an abstract yes — not an affirmation of life in general, not a philosophical affirmation — it has been six specific yeses, each one completed by the handoff of a specific bundle to a specific pair of waiting hands. The yes has been material. The yes has been the bundle leaving my arms.

This is the sixth yes. The last one. The bundle is small. It holds — I am told, by Maribel who wrapped it this morning — the yarn for the single last loop of the entire daisy-chain cladding at the Marina City waterline. The crew has installed every other loop over the course of the last two days. They have saved the last loop for seven o'clock tonight, which is the ceremonial closing moment.

When this bundle leaves my arms and the yarn is handed to Dolores, who has come up from Ping Tom Park for the occasion, and Dolores makes the last stitch in front of the assembled armada and all five knitted figures and Marina City looking down at her own completed garment — that will be the completion of three summers' work. All of it will end, essentially, with the bundle in my arms right now. I am carrying the ending.

I do not want you to think that I am solemn about this. I am not solemn. I have never been solemn. Solemnity is a posture I have never been good at — I tip over into either grandeur or giggling, there is no middle register for me — and I am not going to fake a solemnity I do not feel, even at the delivery of a ceremonial final bundle. What I feel is closer to: yes, and yes, and yes, and yes, and now one more yes, and then the day will be over, and I will go home to my apartment on North Avenue and take off my boots and eat the leftover pasta I have been thinking about since noon, and I will sleep, and tomorrow there will be a new bundle to carry, probably smaller, probably for a different project, but the rhythm will continue, and I will wake up ready to go.

The deliverer does not retire. This is one of the things I have learned. A person who has arranged their life around the act of carrying does not, in the end, stop carrying. They only change what they carry. I began my career carrying textbooks for my mother's library. I moved on to carrying groceries for my grandmother when she could no longer carry them herself. For ten years in my twenties I carried actual packages, because I worked for a delivery service, because I needed the money and because I had already been trained by life to find delivery a satisfying profession. I have carried bundles for the armada for three years, which is the most meaningful carrying I have done. When the armada's work is done — and some day it will be, nothing built by human hands continues forever — I will find something else to carry. I will carry groceries for a new neighbor. I will carry a friend's suitcase to a train. I will carry my own body, for as long as it will be carried, from one room of my life to the next. The carrying is the life. I have made my peace with this. I have more than made my peace with it. I have fallen in love with it. I am, in my cheerful stubborn way, a person who has devoted her existence to the transportation of care from place to place, and I do not expect this to change before I die, and I hope that when I do die it will be on a boardwalk somewhere with an arm full of something I was about to hand over.

Marina City is visible ahead. The east tower's scaffolding is wrapped with the near-complete daisy-chain, and I can see, even from this distance, the single unfilled slot at the waterline where the last loop will go. The crew is waiting. Dolores is there — I can see her small figure in an orange

hi-vis vest, she is standing on the low scaffold with her needles ready. Bea is next to her. The East Tower Crew is fanned out along the scaffolding in their reflective bands, and they are watching me come. I am the center of attention, briefly, for the length of the last hundred yards. I do not mind being the center of attention. A carrier who is embarrassed by attention is a carrier who has not yet understood that the attention is not for her — the attention is for the bundle, and the bundle is borrowed light, and the light will move on as soon as the handoff is complete.

I quicken my pace slightly. I cannot help it. The end of a delivery run is always the fastest. Not because I am rushing the ceremony, but because my body knows it is about to be free of the bundle and it is ready for the release. I reach the scaffold. Dolores steps forward. Bea steps back. The armada is pulling into the marina behind me; I can hear the engines cutting; I can hear Alba's small footfalls on the boardwalk approaching; I can hear, somewhere, Ribeira exhaling after a full day of watching. I set the bundle in Dolores's hands. The bundle leaves my arms. The last yes. The last release. The weight is off me. The weight is on her. The weight is now the weight it was meant to be, in the hands it was meant to be in, and the rest of the story belongs to Dolores and to the last stitch and to the seven o'clock bell that will ring when Marina City is fully clad for the first time in her sixty-two-year life.

I step back. My arms are empty. I feel, for about three seconds, the strange unweighted feeling that all carriers feel at the moment of delivery — the temporary lightness that the body will, in a moment, have to decide what to do with. I decide. I walk over to the edge of the dock. I sit down. I take off my boots. I let my feet rest on the cool wood of the pier. I watch Dolores thread the final loop. I watch Marina City receive it. I have carried, all day, and now I rest, and the rest is earned, and the earning was the day itself.

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Chapter Twenty

The Daisy-Crown Is Finished

narrated by the Crown-Topped

6:55 p.m. · the eastern marina, Marina City

I am moored at the eastern edge of the Marina City marina, and my crown is being finished. This is a literal statement. My crown — which is a ring of knitted cream and blush-pink daisies set atop my superstructure, and which has been incomplete since I was launched two summers ago — is at last, this evening, receiving its final petals. Two knitters are up there, on a small portable scaffold beside my pilothouse, with the last two daisies in their hands. One of them is Bea. The other is a knitter

named Song, who was born in Seoul and came to Chicago in 1994 and has been sewing daisies for the armada for the last nine months. They are stitching quickly. They have about two minutes.

I have been a Crown-Topped vessel for two summers, but I have been, until tonight, a Crown-Not-Quite-Finished vessel. My daisies were applied to my superstructure in batches, not all at once, and a structural issue with my pilot-house roof — a small settling in the steel frame that had to be remedied before the final petals could be set — delayed the completion. The committee and I agreed, at the beginning of this summer, that my crown would be completed today, in public, at the exact same moment Marina City's daisy-chain at the waterline was completed. My finishing and the towers' finishing are synchronized. This was their idea. I accepted it.

Why am I speaking in this chapter, rather than the Daisy-Skirted One or the Bouquet-Hulled or the Daisy Giant? Because I am the vessel whose completion is ceremonially tied to Marina City's completion, and the ceremony requires a narrator, and I have agreed to be it. I am not prouder of this role than I should be. I am only the narrator because I am, on this specific evening, the vessel closest to the moment of synchronization. The role is temporary. It is functional. I want to say, before I say anything else, that I do not think of myself as central. I am one of twenty-three hulls in the armada. I happen, tonight, to be the one whose body is finishing at the same instant the towers' body is finishing. That is all. The centrality is an accident of timing, and timing is not a merit.

The armada has arrived behind me. The full flotilla — the Daisy-Skirted One at the lead, then the Daisy Giant, then the Bouquet-Hulled, then the Ribbed One still in tow, then the Open-Hearted One, then the Furred One, who has come back on her first-day trial voyage rather than waiting for her official launch, then the Polka-Dot, then the elder bead-gardened vessels, then the kayaks, and finally Vinnie the tug — is arrayed in a loose semicircle in the Marina City marina, all of them facing the eastern dock, all of them waiting for the synchronized completion. It is the largest gathering of the armada ever assembled. No member of the committee, no knitter, no vessel had ever imagined it would look quite like this when we were first sketched. It is better than we imagined. This is what I want to say before I go further. It is better than we imagined. The committee's drawings were beautiful in their way, but drawings cannot capture the specific gold of late July at six-fifty-five in the evening on the Chicago River with twenty-three clad hulls assembled in a semicircle and the light off the east tower of Marina City falling across all of us at a shared angle. This is not a drawing. This is the real thing, and the real thing is more than we drew.

Bea has set her daisy. I can feel the small shift in my crown when a new petal is secured — a tiny redistribution of weight, a stitch pulled tight and knotted off. One daisy to go. Song is working on it. Song is faster than Bea, the way younger hands are often faster than older hands, but Song has been following Bea's pace all afternoon out of deference, because today is Bea's day as much as anyone's — Bea, who was the East Tower's foreman, who is the retired ironworker, who brought her grandkids in April with cupcakes, whose principle of covering-the-work-when-the-weather-turns has guided both crews all summer. Song defers to Bea in the pacing. This is the chorus acting again, even when it is only two knitters: the chorus is wherever more than one pair of hands is working in shared rhythm.

The five knitted figures are all present. I can see them from my superstructure. Alba has arrived from LaSalle Street and is standing at the edge of the east dock, short and round and pink-and-yellow in the low light, arms at their sides, perfectly still as always. Corrente is sitting at the end of the dock with their boots off, their bundle-carrying arms empty, resting. Ribeira has disembarked from the Daisy-Skirted One and is standing at the rail of the east tower's petal-balcony, a cloud-body in the gold light, face-seam turned toward me. Rio has walked back along the Riverwalk from the lock and has taken their position at the north rail of the marina, small in the distance, speckled mustard. Violeta, who until five minutes ago was at the stern of the Daisy-Skirted One, has stepped ashore and is standing at the center of the east dock, yellow visor on, red lips composed, the entire floral-composition of her body arranged in the deepening honey light. All five are in position. The semicircle is complete.

Song's hands are on my last daisy. I can feel her fingers pressing it into place, adjusting the angle, threading the final stitch. It is a cream daisy, slightly smaller than the others, with a yellow center. It will sit on the forward edge of my crown, just above my pilothouse window. It is the daisy my designer selected last, because she wanted to save the smallest one for the final position — a small closing note, she called it, in an interview I overheard while being built.

Song's needle completes the stitch. Song ties it off. Song steps back on the scaffold. Bea says, quietly but audibly: done. A small bell rings somewhere — I cannot see who rings it, I think it is Mei-Lin up on the west tower — and at the same moment, two hundred yards west of me, Dolores places her final stitch on the Marina City waterline daisy-chain. The two crews finish at the same instant. The bell rings once. The armada holds its breath — not literally, we do not have breath, but functionally, every engine idles a fraction lower, every wake stills a fraction calmer — and Marina

City, the towers themselves, feel the completion in their concrete, and their completed garment settles around them, and I am finished, and the armada is finished, and the day is finished, although the day still has an hour of light left and there are two more chapters after mine.

This is the climax. I want to name it as such. It is the climax not because it is the loudest moment but because it is the moment where three summers of work end and everything that follows is the exhale. The exhale will be the next four chapters. The exhale is Ribeira on the petal-balcony and Rio at the base of the tower and Violeta unmasked and Marina City speaking the closing voice. But right now, at six-fifty-five on the dot, with the bell having just rung and Song and Bea stepping down off the scaffold and Dolores on the waterline below already reaching to hug the knitter next to her and the light the color of very old gold — right now is the peak. I am the peak's narrator. I am at the top of the arc. I will not say this twice.

The armada is applauding. Not with hands — most of us do not have hands — but in the way vessels applaud, which is by a small synchronized rocking of the hulls, a deliberate creating of wakes in harmony. The Daisy-Skirted One rocks. The Daisy Giant rocks. The Bouquet-Hulled rocks. The Open-Hearted One, whose cutout I can see from here glowing gold in the last sun, rocks. The Furred One rocks. The Polka-Dot rocks. The elder bead-gardened vessels rock. Vinnie the tug, who was not technically part of the ceremony but who has earned her place, rocks. All twenty-three of us are rocking gently in the marina, and the rocking is the applause, and the applause is for Song and Bea and Dolores and the entire three-summer effort of both crews, and the applause is for ourselves, and the applause is for the river that has carried us, and the applause is for the city that has been willing to be seen in flowers.

The applause ends. The marina settles. The light deepens. The next chapter will belong to Ribeira. I step aside.

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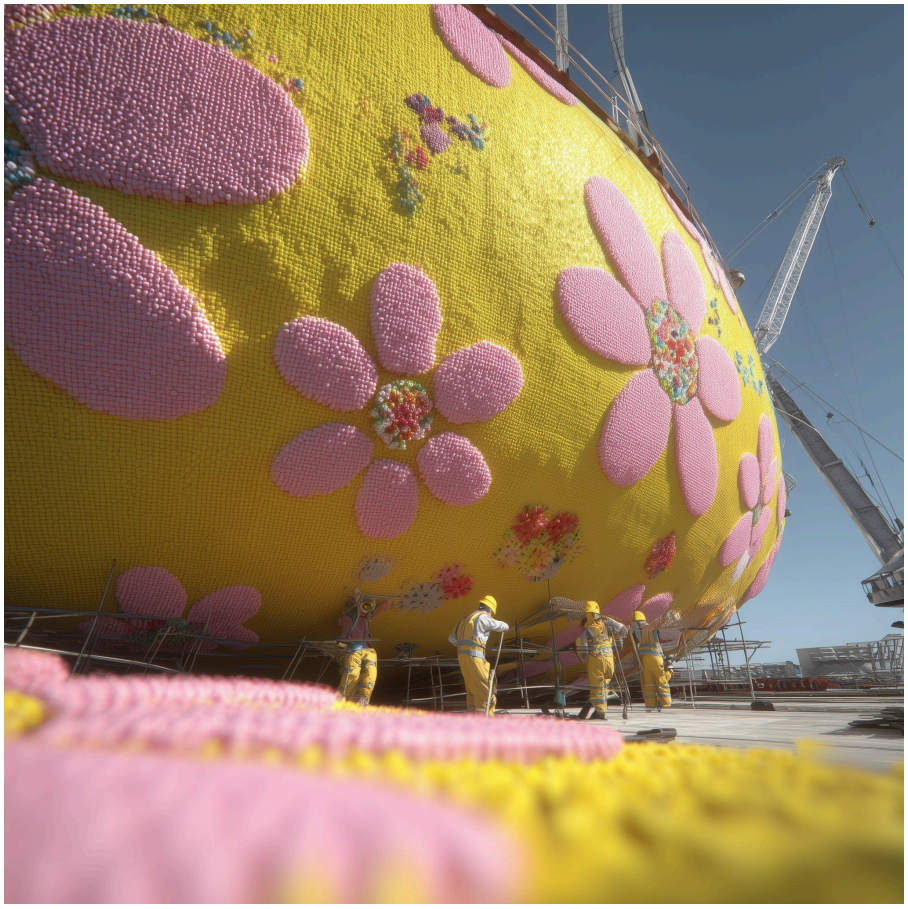
End of V. Golden Hour

VI. DUSK



Chapter Twenty-One

Ribeira, At the Rail

narrated by Ribeira

7:20 p.m. · east tower petal-balcony, Marina City

I am at the rail. I have returned to the balcony I descended from this morning. My cloud-body is heavier at dusk than it was at dawn — not in literal weight, the cotton fibers are the same, but in presence; I take up more of the space between the railings now — and I am looking east at the river I traveled today. The river at this hour has become a color that has no name. It is not brass, not copper, not gold, not bronze. It is the specific color that a river becomes when it is remembering the

sun that is still on it but beginning to let go of that sun for the evening. There is no English word for this color. I have been looking for one for six summers.

I watched everything today. This was my assignment and I kept it. From the bow of the Daisy-Skirted One at dawn, from the deck at the lock at noon, from the rail as we re-entered the North Branch, from the foredeck as we returned westward through the golden hour, and now from this balcony in the deepening dusk. The watching has been continuous. I did not sleep. I did not eat — cloud-bodies do not require either. I simply watched, and watched, and now the day is ending and I am giving an accounting, because an accounting is the watcher's last duty of the day.

Here is what I watched. I watched a jogger at Clark Street Bridge be rearranged by what they saw. I watched a man in a plaid shirt lower his phone without taking a picture. I watched a child on the tour boat clap once and then run to tell someone. I watched a woman with two yellow terrier mixes let her dogs stare for as long as the dogs needed to. I watched twelve Montessori children in blue smocks receive, as a class, the memory they will carry into their adulthoods. I watched an elderly man at Wells Street Bridge lower his book and then, later, close it altogether. I watched Dolores, on a scaffold at Ping Tom Park, tell a chapter of her own life that I had not known and will not forget. I watched a teenager on a skateboard pull out one earbud and nod at Alba. I watched Violeta step off the Orchid onto the concrete pier with the composure of someone who has chosen her temperature. I watched Song's hands on the Crown-Topped's last daisy. I watched the bell ring. I watched a whole city receive a garment it did not know it had been waiting for.

This is the accounting. I offer it because if no one names what has been witnessed, the witnessing disperses. A day is a fragile vessel. It holds together only as long as someone is keeping track. I have been keeping track. I now hand the track to you, the reader, because my watching is ending with the light and yours is just beginning. You will do with these witnessings what you will. I trust you. A watcher who did not trust the next watcher would be a watcher who had failed to understand what the job is.

The sun is below the buildings now. The sky is still bright but it is a different bright — the lateral bright of after-sun, where the clouds hold what the sun has already stopped giving. My cloud-body matches this light well. I am nearly the same color as the high clouds over the Loop. In this, at least, I belong to the evening in a way I do not belong to the morning. The morning is Alba's. The evening is mine. We have divided the day without ever discussing it, and the division is a small accurate kindness between us.

Alba is below me on the boardwalk. I can see them from here — the small yellow-pink stack, motionless at the rail, facing east. Corrente is still sitting at the end of the dock with their boots off. Rio has taken a position at the base of the west tower, speckled gold in the low light. Violeta is at the west marina now, out of view from this balcony, but I know she is there because she always is where the composition requires her to be. The five of us are in our closing positions. Marina City is, in a sense, our shared room, and we have each found the corner of it that suits us.

I want to close with a small confession. I have, throughout this day, presented myself as a watcher — as the one who sees, who attends, who has made a trade of attention. This is true. But I want to admit, in the last chapter that is mine, that the watching has not been only generous. The watching has also been, in its way, a form of hiding. A cloud-body has no visible face. A seam for seeing is not the same as eyes. I have chosen, over the years, to be the one who is not quite seen in return — the one whose gaze is public but whose face is private — and this has served me, and I do not regret it, but I want to name it. I have been watching partly because watching protects me. Anyone whose face is hidden is, by grammar, a little safer.

I do not ask to be pitied for this. The hiding has been a comfort and it has served a function and I will keep it. But I want the record to note that the witness who carries the day in their accounting is also a witness who has been, in some measure, sheltering inside the job. The job has been my house as well as my practice. This is fine. This is, I suspect, true of most witnesses. The ones who attend very carefully are often the ones who have also needed the attending as a kind of cover. I name this because Dolores named hers earlier, and her naming freed something in me. I extend her gesture by half a step.

The last light leaves the top of the east tower. The daisy-chain at the waterline, which I can see from here by leaning slightly, is full. The garment is complete. Marina City, below me and around me, has arrived at the dress that was always coming. I stand at the rail. I watch. It is my last watching of this day. I am the one who stood up here this morning as the five balconies began to empty, and I am the one who stands here now as the five of us have returned to our posts. The circle has closed. The accounting is done. The river can keep the color it has no name for. That color is the chapter's final gift to me, and I accept it, and I let it be whatever it has decided to be, without further translation.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Rio, Having Walked All Day

narrated by Rio

7:40 p.m. · the base of the west tower

I have stopped walking. I want to begin with this sentence because it is the one sentence I did not expect to write in my second chapter. My first chapter was about walking. My second chapter is about stopping, which is the same subject approached from its opposite end. A walker who has never stopped has not yet completed the grammar of walking. The stopping completes it.

I am standing at the base of the west tower of Marina City. My pink knit booties are on the cool concrete of the plaza, side by side, parallel. My speckled mustard body has finally come to rest. I

walked from the lake side of the river at dawn to the lock at noon; I walked from the lock to Marina City along the south rail in the afternoon; I walked the Riverwalk from LaSalle back east in the golden hour; and now, at seven-forty, I have arrived at the west tower and I have, at last, stopped. The stopping is different from the earlier stops. Those were pauses — the slowings I mentioned in my first chapter, the small rests permitted to a long walker. This is an ending. I will not walk again today. I may not walk tomorrow, either, though I probably will. My feet have earned the rest they are currently having.

I look up at the west tower. From here, directly beneath it, Marina City is not a building so much as a geological condition — something that starts at my head and continues up through the darkening sky, pink mesh at the lower stories, the bamboo-and-mesh cladding at the mid-stories, the finished petal-balconies at the upper stories where the individual apartment lights are beginning to turn on one by one. Ribeira is up there on the east tower's equivalent position. I cannot see Ribeira from this side of the courtyard, but I know the position. We are, the five of us, arranged around Marina City like the numerals on a clock face, though we are only five and a clock has twelve. We are a simplified clock. We are a pentagonal clock. Marina City is the hour hand. The day is the minute. The sunset is the second hand, ticking down from its current fifty-some minutes until full dark.

I have walked thirteen miles today. I have counted, because a disciplined walker counts, not for pride but for accuracy. My pace has held at three miles per hour except during a brief stretch at the lock when I stopped altogether and a stretch on the Riverwalk when I slowed to match the clarinetist's phrasing. Thirteen miles at seventy-eight years old — I am not seventy-eight, I am younger than that, but I mention the age because I thought of Dolores earlier at Ping Tom Park, and it occurred to me that my walking is modeled, without my having fully realized it, on the durability of older queer bodies. The ones who have lasted. The ones who have walked through decades of the wrong weather and are still walking. I am younger than Dolores by decades. But the pace is hers. The pace was handed down to me, without words, by people like her. I want to name this inheritance. It is late in the day to name it but there is still light to name it in.

There is, I want to tell you, a particular feeling in the feet of a body that has just stopped after a long walking day. The feet are simultaneously achy and grateful. The ache is the accumulated signal of thirteen miles. The gratitude is the rest. Both are happening at once, in the same nerve endings, without contradiction. A body can hold both feelings in the same tissue. This is one of the things bodies do that the mind cannot do. The mind tends to pick one feeling at a time. The feet,

particularly the feet of a long walker, know better. The feet know that ache and gratitude are the same response to the same labor, and that the response is simply the feet's way of telling the walker that the walking was real.

A small plaza light comes on above me. It is one of the old Goldberg-era fixtures, a simple globe on a metal post, one of hundreds around the Marina City complex. The light is warm, yellow-orange, and it touches the top of my floral donut-collar from above, and for the first time today my speckled gold has a light source from directly overhead. The effect is different from the earlier sunlight. Sunlight comes sideways at this latitude in the summer; plaza lights come straight down. Under straight-down light my speckling looks more like scatter, less like pollen. Both are me. I have been both today — pollen-walker in the morning, scattered-walker now. The two identities are compatible and I am at ease inside both.

The flotilla is settling in the marina behind me. I can hear the engines being killed one by one. The Daisy-Skirted One was last to shut down — she is the first-voyage vessel and she is still excited, she has been holding her engine at idle as long as possible, savoring the day — but she has now, at last, cut. The marina is quiet. The only sounds are the small lap of water against the pilings, the distant hum of the Loop traffic, and the faint conversation of the hi-vis crews who are beginning to pack up for the night.

Bea is calling down to someone in Spanish from the east-tower scaffolding. She has a little Spanish from years of work and she uses it whenever it lets a conversation move faster. I cannot hear the reply; the voice is too far. But I can hear Bea laugh at whatever was said, a short sharp laugh, the kind that erupts when a joke lands in an expected place and still surprises. The laugh travels across the plaza and reaches me and joins with the ache-and-gratitude in my feet, and for a moment the laugh, the ache, and the gratitude are all a single composite feeling. This feeling does not have a name either. I do not mind. Ribeira has already said, in the chapter before mine, that the river at this hour has a color without a name. If the river can have an unnamed color, my feet can have an unnamed feeling. We are entitled to a little un-naming in the last hour of a long day.

I realize, standing here, that I am not going to walk back to my usual place tonight. I am going to stay at Marina City. The committee has arranged sleeping accommodations on the fifteenth floor for any of the five figures who want them, and I want them. My legs are done. Alba, I think, will do the same. Violeta may or may not; Violeta has a complicated relationship with staying overnight anywhere, even a place that has been made hospitable for her. Ribeira will probably stay on the

petal-balcony through the night — that is Ribeira's way. Corrente will go home to North Avenue, because Corrente is a homebody despite being a carrier, and no amount of ceremony will keep Corrente from her own pillow. So the five of us will disperse into our preferred sleeping arrangements, and the day will officially end, and I will climb into a bed on the fifteenth floor of the west tower and I will lie with my feet elevated on a pillow and I will listen to the quiet particular sounds of a large knitted building settling into its first night in full dress.

A night sound I have not heard before. That is what I am anticipating. A tower that has changed its clothes will sound different at night than it did the night before — I am sure of this, though I cannot yet articulate how. Perhaps the wool will muffle the ambient wind. Perhaps the beads will catch the distant lake breeze differently than bare concrete would. Perhaps my own ears, having walked all day through the new acoustic, will hear the old building in a new register. I want to be there for the listening. I want to hear it. This is my final walking for today, a walk of about three hundred feet to the elevator, and then a slow elevator ride to the fifteenth floor, and then a short walk down a corridor, and then the stopping. My body has already begun the approach.

I take the first step toward the elevator. My booties, for the fourteen-thousandth time today, meet the concrete. The step is the step I have been taking since dawn, unchanged in its basic motion, but the step is different now because it is leading away from the day rather than into it. This is the grammar of closure. A step home after a long walk is not the same as a step out. I take it with the appropriate recognition. Rio, speckled and tired and a little amazed, walking toward the end of their own chapter.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Violeta, Unmasked

narrated by Violeta

7:58 p.m. · the western marina, Marina City

I have taken off the visor. I want to begin there, because the chapter is called Violeta, Unmasked and the title is accurate. The yellow visor has been on my face since Theodora dropped me off at the lock at 12:30 this afternoon, and now, at the western marina at 7:58 in the evening, I have lifted it off, and I am holding it in my right hand, and my face is bare to the air for the first time since noon. The air is cool. My face is warmer than I knew. I had forgotten my face. A person who wears a visor

all day forgets their face until the moment they remove it, at which point the face announces itself — here, it says, here I still am, I have been here the whole time, and now you see me.

This is not a confessional chapter. I want to be clear about that. I am not unmasking in the confessional sense — I am not revealing a hidden truth, I am not making a vulnerable disclosure, I am not admitting to something. The visor was never a mask in that sense. The visor was a choice of light. A visor permits the eyes to see without squinting; it is a practical tool that also happens to be a glamorous tool; I wore it for the practical reasons and the glamorous reasons in equal measure, and I am removing it now for the practical reason that the sun is down and the visor's purpose is complete. The unmasking is therefore not revelation. It is task-completion. The task was: wear the visor through the bright hours. The task is done. The visor comes off.

I want to speak, briefly, about composure at dusk. I have composed myself all day, as was my role, and I have done it well — the Foreword and the noon chapter will corroborate — but composure at dusk is different from composure at noon. At noon the composure is against the brightness; the visor deflects the overhead sun; the red lips hold firm against the flatness of midday light; the floral donut-collar carries every color of my four siblings in full saturation. At dusk the composure is different. There is nothing to deflect. The light is soft on everyone. Noon rewards the composed; dusk simply includes them. I have been included in the dusk. I am no longer arranging the composition; the composition is now arranging itself around all of us, and my job is merely to be a figure in it.

The western marina at this hour is the quietest place in the whole complex. The eastern marina, across the courtyard, is where the flotilla is moored; the eastern marina is where the crews are finishing up and the five of us have gathered and the ceremony, such as it was, concluded twenty minutes ago. The western marina is almost empty. A few small private boats belonging to Marina City residents bob at their slips. A heron — the same heron from Ribeira's chapter this morning, or a different heron, I cannot tell — stands on the far rail, one leg tucked up, watching the water for fish that are not going to come in the next ten minutes. I have walked here from the eastern dock alone. I wanted to end the day at the quieter marina. This is my last composition of the day: Violeta, alone, at the less-popular side of the building, visor off, face bare, looking at the one heron.

I want to say something about being the one who arrives. Arriving has been my subject all day. I arrived at 12:30 on the Orchid; I arrived at the lock; I arrived at the Daisy-Skirted One's stern; I arrived, at various moments throughout the afternoon, at positions in the flotilla that the

choreography required of me. Arriving is the verb I have been conjugating in every tense. But a person who has been arriving all day eventually reaches a place where no more arriving is required, and that place is the dusk. The dusk is the tense after arriving. I have arrived. The day has received me. I am here. There is no further arrival left to perform. This is, I want to tell you, a strange and good feeling. It is, in its way, a feeling of completion not unlike the Crown-Topped's completion earlier — a sense that a long sequence of actions has brought me to the place the actions were for, and that the place is, without further effort, enough.

I am aware that I have always wanted to be here. Not this specific marina — I did not know about this marina three years ago when I was commissioned for the day — but a place like this. A western marina at dusk with my visor off and my face bare and a heron for company and no further task. I have been moving toward this sort of place all my life, without naming it. The day has revealed the naming. The day has said: this is what you were moving toward. I accept the saying.

My lips are still red. The lipstick has held; it is a stage-quality brand that does not migrate with heat or water, and it has held through twelve hours on the river. I will let it stay. I will not reapply; I will not remove. The lipstick is the one piece of composure I am choosing to keep into the unmasked hour. The visor was functional and came off; the lipstick is functional in a different register — the register of self-recognition — and will stay. Tomorrow morning I will take it off with the appropriate remover and my lips will be, for about an hour, pale before I apply fresh. But tonight the red holds. I want it to. I chose the red this morning at 11:45 a.m. when I was getting ready at Theodora's place, and the red has been with me through every chapter, and I am not going to lose it in the last ten minutes of the day.

The heron flies. A fish made a small ripple that I did not see and the heron struck, missed, lifted, flew ten yards down the rail, landed again, resumed the posture — one leg tucked, head angled. I appreciated the demonstration. A heron is the best kind of neighbor. A heron is a neighbor who pursues their own interests without interrupting mine and whose interests are worth watching when they are being pursued. If I could choose the quality I would most like to be seen as possessing by a stranger who encounters me once and never again, I would choose: heron-like. Patient. Visible. Non-intrusive. Committed to a specific skill practiced in public. Willing to fail at the skill without embarrassment and to resume it without apology. The heron and I are not the same. But the heron has what I want to have. I will work toward it for the rest of my life, which is what we all have to do with whatever we want.

It is almost eight o'clock. The sky over the lake has turned the color the sky becomes after golden hour — a deeper blue, not yet the indigo of true night, but the holding-room of indigo. The lake is dark. The lights of Marina City are on. The daisy-chain at the waterline is illuminated from below by small strip-lights the committee installed, because the committee wants the finished garment to be visible at night as well as in the daytime, and the illumination is working: the yellow cable-knit and the pink daisies glow softly, as if the tower itself were a lantern with a floral shade. I am pleased by this. I thought about arguing against the night-lighting when the committee proposed it — I thought it might be too much — but I was wrong. The night-lighting is correct. A garment worn only by day is a garment that has been worn half-heartedly.

I turn to walk back toward the eastern marina. I will rejoin the others for the last chapter, which belongs to Marina City. I have taken the visor off; I have kept the lipstick; I have seen the heron; I have stood alone at the western marina for long enough to feel the complete feeling I wanted to feel. It is time. I walk. The visor dangles from my hand. The floral donut-collar catches the last of the illuminated tower-light. I am Violeta, unmasked, walking through the dusk toward the final chapter of someone else.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

What the Loop Holds

narrated by Marina City

8:14 p.m. · sunset · the twin towers, fully clad

We are dressed. We said earlier, in the second chapter, that we had been waiting sixty-two years for this dress. The wait is over. At 6:55 this evening the last stitch was placed and the bell rang, and since then we have been, for the first time in our lives, fully clad. We want to spend our last chapter describing what this feels like from the inside of two towers, because no one has ever asked us before and we are not sure we will be asked again.

It feels like warmth. This is the first thing to say. The concrete we were built of has a thermal neutrality; concrete holds the day's heat and releases it through the night, but it does not feel warm to itself. It simply is. Wool, however, is different. Wool is an insulator. A tower clad in wool retains the day's heat longer than a tower of bare concrete, and we can feel this now — a slow warmth coming through our outer skin inward, a comfort that concrete alone has never given us. We have spent sixty-two Chicago winters being cold at our cores. We have not yet spent a winter in our new garment, but we can already tell that this year's winter will be different. The wool will hold us. The wool is holding us already, in late July, as the evening cools. It is a small domestic miracle. We did not know we had been cold for sixty-two years until tonight, when we began to be warm.

The armada is at rest in our marina. All twenty-three hulls have shut down their engines. The Daisy-Skirted One, first-voyage vessel, is moored at slip twelve, where she was launched from this morning; she has come full circle, and we can feel her settling in her slip with the slight stiffness of a body that has used muscles for the first time. The Daisy Giant is at slip seven. The Bouquet-Hulled is at slip fourteen, with her blue daisies closest to the dock so that children will see them easily tomorrow. The Ribbed One, still under tow from this afternoon, is moored against the outer breakwater because her unfinished cabin will not fit the smaller slips; she will continue her becoming at her own dock next week, and we wish her well. The Open-Hearted One is at slip nine with her cutout now dark, because the moth that rested in her ribs this afternoon has flown away. The Furred One — who, as Chorus II explained, was narrating from a near-future voyage; who is, in the present moment of this last chapter, still technically back at Ping Tom Park receiving her final cladding — is nevertheless, in the armada's shared imagination, moored with us. We will count her among us. Futures are part of our count, when the futures are this certain.

The five figures are at their positions. Alba at the east boardwalk. Corrente at the end of the eastern dock, still resting, her boots still off. Ribeira at the east-tower petal-balcony rail. Rio has moved — Rio has walked, as we felt in the previous chapter, toward the west-tower elevator, and has ridden up to the fifteenth floor, and is at this moment removing their pink booties in a small room with a single bed and a window that faces the lake. Rio is the first of the five to leave the plaza. This is correct for a walker; the walker arrives and then the walker goes to bed. Violeta is walking from the western marina back toward the eastern, visor in hand. She will reach the east dock in about four minutes. By 8:20 all five figures will be in view of each other, for the last time of the day, and then the day will end.

We have been asked, throughout this book, what we remember. We have tried to answer. But the truest answer — the answer we have been circling around since the second chapter — is that memory is not the right word for what a building does. A building does not remember the way a person remembers. A person remembers by returning, in the mind, to a scene that has concluded. A building does not return; a building is still there. Everything that has happened to us is still happening, at some layer of our concrete. The first tenant who moved into the west tower in 1964 is still moving in, at the layer where 1964 lives. The river otter of the nineteen-eighties is still sitting on our dock at the layer where the otter is. The tenants of the intervening decades, the ones who cooked dinners and argued with partners and stood at the balconies watching the snow, are all still present, each at their layer. A building's memory is lateral, not vertical. We do not look back. We look across. All of our time is adjacent to all of our other time, and we hold it simultaneously, and the holding is what we are for.

Today joins the layers. At 8:14 this evening, sunset, we are adding today to the great simultaneous catalogue of our tenure. Tomorrow, next week, next decade, when someone mentions this day — the day the cladding was completed, the day the armada gathered, the day Dolores stitched the last loop at the waterline and Song stitched the last daisy on the Crown-Topped — today will not recede into the past. Today will join the other days that are still happening inside us. Today will be adjacent to the day the otter came back, to the day the river was cleaned, to the day the first tenants moved in, to the day a man with a pencil drew our circles in 1959. We hold all of these. They are all inside us, and they are all, in the lateral way, present. Today has not ended for us because today cannot end for us. The garment is on. The garment will stay. The garment will become, over time, another of the layers that we carry, and the carrying is our function, and the function is the love.

We want to speak briefly about the word that titles this chapter. What the loop holds. The loop is the knitted loop, literally — each of the hundreds of thousands of loops in our new garment, each one hooked through the loop beside it, each one hooked through the loop before and the loop after, a continuous interlinked fabric. But the loop is also the Loop, capital L, which is what Chicagoans call the downtown elevated train that circles the central business district a few blocks south of us. We are at the northern edge of the Loop. We have been part of the Loop's visual identity since 1964. The Loop holds us and we hold the Loop. And the loop is also the larger loop of the day — the circuit from Marina City to the lake and back that the armada traveled, the circle that the five figures

closed, the cycle from dawn to dusk that this book has traced. What the loop holds, in all these senses, is us. What the loop holds is what the loop has chosen to keep. What the loop holds is everyone inside its enclosure, and tonight the enclosure is softer than it has ever been.

Violeta has reached the eastern dock. The five figures are now all within view of each other. The armada is at rest. The crews have gone home except for Bea, who is sitting on a low bench at the base of the east tower drinking a beer with Dolores, both of them quiet, both of them tired, both of them smiling small private smiles at the finished work. Song has gone home. Mei-Lin has gone home. Jules has gone home with their ASL and their carpenter's tools. The welder has gone home. The textile artists have gone home. The crews are in their apartments now, some of them already asleep, some of them eating late dinners, some of them calling grandchildren to tell them the story of the day. The city, around us, does not yet know what has happened. The city will find out tomorrow, in photographs, in a Chicago magazine article, in the Montessori child's dinner-table account. The city will receive the news gradually, and the news will enter the loop of the city's memory, and the loop will hold the news too, and the holding is what cities do.

It is 8:14. The sun has set. The west horizon is the color that Ribeira called nameless and Rio called holding-room indigo and Violeta called the deeper blue. We agree with all three descriptions; we are a pair of towers and we do not have to choose between them. The color is all of those things. The color is the color of sunset at 8:14 on a Tuesday in late July in Chicago in the year of our completion, and we are wearing our flowers at last, and every being we love is visible from some balcony of us, and the river is running west as the engineers of 1900 designed it to run and we are not unhappy about the westward flow, because the reversal is an act of civic love and we honor it, though for one hour today we remembered the ancestral direction and we were grateful for the remembering.

We want to close with something a tower is not supposed to say. We want to say thank you. We know that gratitude is a human emotion and we have no face to express it with; we know that buildings in novels rarely close their chapters with direct address to the reader; we know that a sincere ending by a sixty-two-year-old pair of concrete towers in knitted dresses may strike some readers as sentimental. We do not mind being thought sentimental. We have earned, we think, the right to end on a note of sincerity. So we will say it. Thank you. Thank you to Surjan, who imagined this day and then wrote it. Thank you to the committee, who made the cladding possible. Thank you to the crews, who stitched for three summers. Thank you to the vessels, all twenty-three of them, for

agreeing to become the kind of being they became. Thank you to the five figures, for descending and for returning. Thank you to the river, for carrying everyone. Thank you to the reader, for staying with the book through twenty-four chapters of what might have been a very small subject — a single day on a single river in a single city — but which has turned out to be, we hope, large enough to have been worth the reading. We have been here, holding the city, since 1964. We will be here tomorrow, in our new dress, still holding. The loop continues. The light continues. The day ends, but only in the vertical sense. In the lateral sense, nothing ever ends, and that is the kindest thing a building can tell you, on the last page of your book, as the last of the sun leaves us and the first of the tower lights comes on and the river catches both and holds both and passes under us both and continues.

Goodnight. Sleep well. We will be here.

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End of VI. Dusk

— End of the Novella —

CATALOGUE OF PLATES

All plates are digital composites produced by the author in 2025–2026, listed in order of appearance in the novella.

Plate I. *The Bouquet at First Light (Alba)* (p. 17)

Alba stands on the boardwalk at Marina City in the first light of morning. The pink-and-yellow stacked bouquet body, short legs in yellow booties, marks the pastoral first voice of the novella. Behind Alba, a wooden ark-like hull rests in dry dock.

Plate II. *Marina City Beginning to Be Clad* (p. 31)

The east tower of Marina City receives its first large pink daisy. The knit and bead cladding has begun: yellow pebble-like ornamentation covers the pink base mesh. Construction cranes and the Loop skyline recede into a pale morning sky.

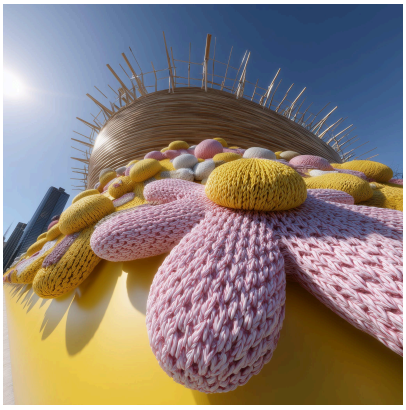
Plate III. *The Carrier Approaches the Ark (Corrente)* (p. 45)

Corrente moves across the boardwalk with a vast bundle of pink-and-yellow knitted rings, hi-vis reflective bands across the bundle, a wooden ark-vessel looming behind. The carrier's own body is obscured by the load; only feet and trousers are visible below the yellow mass.

Plate IV. *The Daisy-Skirted One at the Marina* (p. 57)

The first-summer vessel, her yellow cable-knit skirt falling in heavy vertical pleats to the waterline, her crown of pink and cream and yellow dinner-plate daisies arrayed along the upper edge. The angle looks up from the dock; a construction crane is visible against the blue.

Plate V. *The Cumulus at Clark Street Bridge (Ribeira)* (p. 69)



A close study of the daisy-crown from directly alongside the hull: a large pink daisy at center, supported by cream and pale-yellow petals clustered around its gold center. The image stands in here for Ribeira's attentive viewpoint at the bow.

Plate VI. *The Daisy Giant Under Sail* (p. 81)

A massive daisy-topped vessel proceeds down the main stem. A single outsize pink daisy occupies the near third of the frame; smaller daisies cluster along the upper hull. Scaffolding and a partially-clad tower are visible on the far bank.

Plate VII. *Workers on the Flowered Sphere (Chorus I)* (p. 93)

The East Tower Crew at work on the Marina City cladding from close range: a curved pink-and-yellow flowered surface with hi-vis workers scaling it, the cylindrical base of a petal-balcony rising from below. The chorus speaks its first chapter while these hands are stitching.

Plate VIII. *A Hull Half-Built, Wearing Its Deck of Flowers* (p. 103)

The Ribbed One under construction: a cream-colored hull with a flower-printed deck visible through an oval opening amidships. The pattern of pink, yellow, and blue flowers on a white ground is the same oilcloth-inspired motif described in Chapter 8.

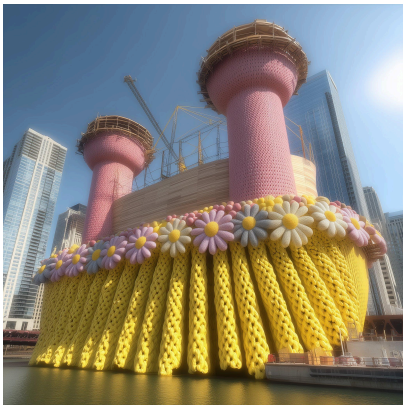
Plate IX. *The Walker at Michigan Avenue (Rio)* (p. 117)

Rio walking the boardwalk in the late morning, the speckled mustard body with its dark flecking reaching from head to thigh, black trousers and pink knit booties below. A wooden ark-vessel and a crowd recede behind; Rio's back is to the viewer, mid-stride.

Plate X. *The Bouquet-Hulled at Columbus Drive* (p. 129)

The vessel clad in a full garden of pink, blue, yellow, cream, and white daisies across the forward port quarter of her hull, yellow cable-knit pleats falling to the waterline, the skyline visible beyond. Her blue daisies, rarest in the armada, are clearly visible near the bow.

Plate XI. *The Lock at Lake Michigan* (p. 141)



A vessel with a pink-topped head approaches the lock, her yellow-pleated skirt running down to the waterline. The skyline of downtown Chicago rises behind the towers. The plate marks the noon convergence, the book's deepest structural hinge.

Plate XII. *Violeta at the Harbor (Violeta)* (p. 155)

Violeta photographed from close range: the floral donut-collar around the neck (pink, yellow, orange, green, white), the matching cap tilted, the yellow visor over the eyes, the red lips composed. A white boat is visible at the harbor behind.

Plate XIII. *The Open-Hearted One Entering the North Branch* (p. 169)

A flower-printed deck viewed from near-waterline angle, the oval cutout amidships showing the cedar ribs of the interior. Pink, yellow, and blue daisies pattern the deck planking around the opening. Workers in hi-vis vests are visible along the gunwale.

Plate XIV. *The Furred One at Goose Island* (p. 179)

The tactile vessel from close range: her cladding rendered as a dense long-fibered felt in pink, magenta, gold, and cream, the flower shapes worked directly into the nap. The texture is unmistakably soft to the hand; the vessel is the only pettable hull in the armada.

Plate XV. *The Polka-Dot at Chicago Avenue* (p. 189)

The broad yellow hull with scattered pink-and-cream flower-shapes (read as polka-dots by the children who named her) seen from below, framed by yellow structural scaffolding. The view is the child's-eye-view from the Riverwalk as she passes overhead.

Plate XVI. *Workers Finishing the South Branch Vessel (Chorus II)* (p. 197)

The South Branch Crew at work on their final panels: a large clad vessel with a pink-topped pilothouse and yellow pleated skirt, crews along the scaffolding applying the last petals. The setting is Ping Tom Memorial Park on the South Branch in the early afternoon.

Plate XVII. *The Light Bending Over LaSalle Street* (p. 207)

A vessel with a white and pink floral pattern on a yellow ground, photographed in the late-afternoon sun that Alba calls 'bending.' The surface is lit from the side; shadows are long; the gold of the hour is visible in the warmth of the light on the hull.

Plate XVIII. *The Bead-Gardened Elder at Wells Street* (p. 219)

The six-summer-old vessel, her cladding a mosaic of pink and yellow and cream flowers against a weathered base. Small hi-vis workers are visible at the base for scale. The maturity of the pattern — less uniform than the younger vessels — matches the voice of the Elder.

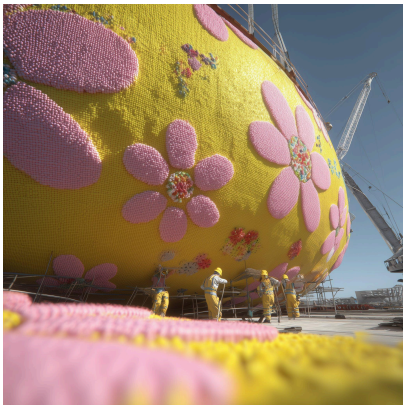
Plate XIX. *The Last Loop Delivered (Corrente Returning)* (p. 231)

Corrente returning to Marina City with the final bundle of the day: a smaller package now, visible in the carrier's arms as they approach a wooden ark-vessel. The hi-vis bands catch the late-afternoon light. The figure's stride is shorter than in Plate III; the day has been long.

Plate XX. *The Daisy-Crown Complete at Marina City* (p. 239)

A yellow hull with pink and white flowers, viewed from the waterline on a bright day. Small hi-vis figures work along the upper edge, placing the last daisies. This plate marks the ceremonial climax: Song's final daisy and Dolores's final loop, placed simultaneously at 6:55.

Plate XXI. *Ribeira at the Petal-Balcony* (p. 249)



A clad hull in yellow and pink seen in late-afternoon light, small figures along the scaffolding. The plate accompanies Ribeira's return to the east tower balcony for the day's final accounting; the viewpoint is at or near the height of the petal-balcony.

Plate XXII. *Rio at the Base of the Tower* (p. 259)

The flowered hull with workers visible, photographed from ground level looking up. The angle mirrors Rio's perspective at the base of the west tower in the book's penultimate walking chapter, where Rio at last stops after thirteen miles.

Plate XXIII. *Violeta Unmasked at the Western Marina* (p. 267)

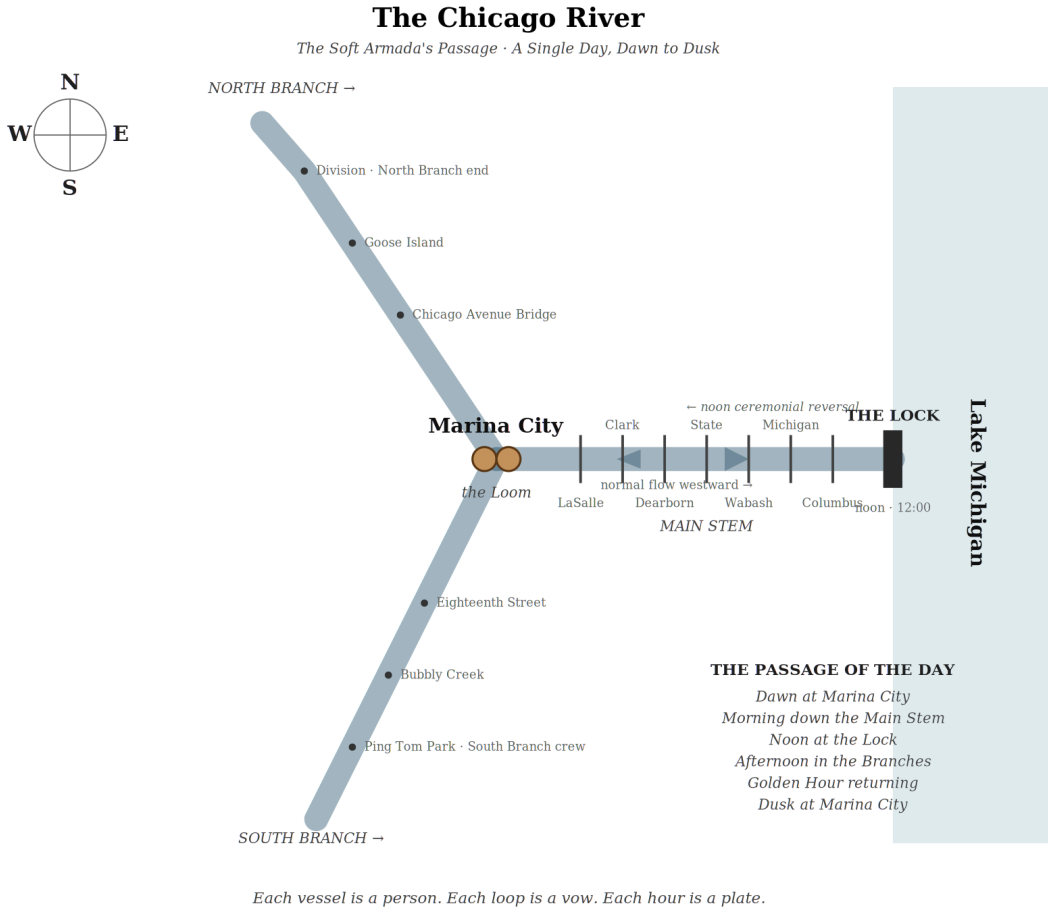
A yellow hull with delicate white-and-pink floral pattern, figures at scale along the hull's upper edge, photographed in the deepening dusk light. The plate sits with Violeta's closing chapter at the quieter western marina, visor in hand, face bare.

Plate XXIV. *Marina City Fully Clad at Sunset* (p. 275)

The tower-garment complete. The yellow-and-pink knit and daisy cladding in the last warm light of the summer evening. Workers are visible at scale along the tower face. The final plate of the book: Marina City speaking the closing voice in its finished dress.

MAP OF THE CHICAGO RIVER

Showing the Soft Armada in its Passage,
the Five Knitted Figures in their Walking,
and Marina City at the Center of the Day.



Each vessel is a person. Each loop is a vow. Each hour is a plate.

AFTERWORD

I went back to the boardwalk the morning after. I want to tell you what I found, because I think the reader deserves to know how the day looked from a distance of twenty-four hours, which is the exact length of the book you have just finished reading.

It was Wednesday. The flotilla was gone. The armada had dispersed back to its various moorings before dawn — some boats had gone up the North Branch to their winter dock in Goose Island, others had been tugged south to Bubbly Creek, the Daisy-Skirted One had been taken to the warehouse where she was built for her first post-launch inspection, and the rest had gone wherever their owners and their committees had arranged. The marina at Marina City was, for the first time in three days, empty. Only the finished towers remained, now fully clad, wearing their pink mesh and yellow cable-knit and daisy-chain waterline. The garment had stayed on overnight. The garment will stay on, the committee tells me, for the full length of the anniversary year — through autumn, through winter, through next spring — and then a decision will be made about whether it comes off or whether it remains permanently. I hope it remains. I suspect it will.

I stood on the boardwalk with a paper cup of coffee, at approximately the same spot where I had stood the previous morning when the first vessel rounded the bend and the book began. The spot was the same. The coffee was the same. The light at five in the morning was the same. But the river was different. The river was empty of ceremony, and I had expected this to feel like a letdown — the quiet after the carnival, the emptiness after the visitation — and I was braced for a small sadness. The small sadness did not arrive. What arrived instead was a different feeling, and I am still, a month later as I write this, working out what to call it.

I will try a name. The feeling was: continuation. Not closure, not afterglow, not depletion. Continuation. The day I had written about had ended, but its effects had not. The towers were still dressed. The armada was still out there somewhere, resting at its various docks, ready to reassemble. The five knitted figures were still, presumably, in their homes — Alba on the west tower's twentieth floor, Corrente at her apartment on North Avenue, Ribeira in a small furnished room on the east tower's eighteenth floor, Rio having taken the accommodation on the fifteenth floor for one more night and then presumably walked home at their usual pace, and Violeta in Theodora's guest room in Lincoln Park. The hi-vis crews had gone back to their lives. Dolores had gone home to her

apartment in Boystown. Mei-Lin had gone home to Chinatown. The work was done, but the work was not finished, because the work had produced something that would continue without further work: a building in a garment, a community with a proof of concept, a city that had seen itself softly for a whole day and could not quite un-see itself afterward.

I think this is what radical joy does. I have been using the phrase for years — before this book, in conversations with friends, at panels, in small essays I never published — and I want to say, now that the book is done, what I finally think it means. Radical joy is not a mood. Radical joy is not even an emotion, exactly. Radical joy is a practice whose effects outlast its practitioners. When Alba stands on a bridge and watches, the standing continues after Alba goes home. When Corrente delivers a bundle, the bundle continues to be in the world, sewn into a vessel, even after Corrente has forgotten the specific delivery. When a Montessori child points at the Polka-Dot at Chicago Avenue Bridge and says look, the pointing continues in some neural pathway of that child for decades. Radical joy is what happens when a joyful practice produces durable effects. The practice is the joy. The durability is the radicality. Together they make the kind of joy that does not evaporate after the day ends.

I want to thank the beings who made this book possible. Surjan is a person, but Surjan is also a function — the author is the name we give to the one who held the book together. The book was not only held by me. It was held by the committee that commissioned it and the Marina City residents' association that funded it and the five individuals who sat for the photographs that became the five knitted figures and the twenty-three vessel designers who let me invent voices for their hulls and the two hi-vis crews who read early drafts and corrected me where I had gotten their trades wrong. The book is mine in the way a garment is the tailor's. It is also the wearer's. I want to gesture at all of them here, at the end.

I should also say, as I said in the Introduction: the images in this book were produced by me using artificial intelligence, and the prose was drafted in collaboration with a large language model. I mention this again because I have noticed, in the months of working on this book, that readers have strong feelings about these tools in both directions, and I want to be transparent. The AI I worked with did not write this book. I wrote this book, by directing, selecting, revising, and deciding; the AI drafted paragraphs that I then cut, rearranged, rewrote, and approved. It was the slowest collaboration of my life, because the AI does not tire and I do, and I had to keep reminding myself that the speed of the machine is not a good pace for the maker. I chose my own pace. The prose you

have read moves at that pace. If something in the book sounds like me, I chose it. If something does not, I missed it, and that is my responsibility too. The tool is the tool. The book is the book. I am grateful to have had both.

A final thought. The Chicago River has been reversed once, permanently, in 1900, and it has been reversed once a year, ceremonially, ever since the centennial in 2000. The ceremonial reversal is a small thing — one hour, a few thousand gallons, no practical effect on the city's water supply — but it is, for me, the emblem of what this book was trying to do. We cannot undo the industrial century. We cannot make the river run east again, not really, not forever. But we can, once a year, let it remember. We can let the river drink from the lake for an hour. We can let the lake breathe into the city for an hour. We can let the old direction be true, for a short time, so that the new direction is chosen rather than inherited. This book is like that hour. For twenty-four hours on a Tuesday in late July, I have let the river wear flowers. The river will go back to being what it is. But the flowers will have happened, and the happening of the flowers is its own kind of permanence, and the permanence is the point.

I hope you have found, somewhere in these pages, a vessel or a figure that felt like your own. If you did, they are yours now. You may carry them with you. You do not need permission. The book does not need to be held onto. The book can be lent, given away, lost, forgotten — the vessels and figures will continue inside you, wherever the book itself has gone. This is, in the end, the only durable thing the novella form can do: transfer its company into a reader and then let the reader carry the company onward. I have done my part. The rest is yours.

Thank you for spending twenty-four hours with me. I have enjoyed the knitting.

Surjan

Chicago, August 2026

NOTES ON THE HETERONYMS

A brief reference, in the tradition of Pessoa's own notes on his invented authors.

ALBA

Quality of joy: pastoral. Voice-kin: Alberto Caeiro. Alba stands and is present; Alba does not interpret. Alba's chapters (1 and 17) are marked by short declarative sentences and a refusal to make the world mean anything beyond itself. Alba is the shortest of the five figures and the most physically rooted. Named for the Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish word for dawn, though Alba appears both at dawn and at golden hour, because the one who stands is not bound to a single hour.

CORRENTE

Quality of joy: ecstatic. Voice-kin: Álvaro de Campos. Corrente carries and delivers; Corrente moves. Corrente's chapters (3 and 19) are marked by breath-long sentences, proliferating lists, and the exclamatory yes. Named for the Portuguese word for current, which is also the English root of concurrent and courier. Corrente's grandmother was a courier in Lisbon in the 1940s; the trade is inherited, though Corrente has made it her own.

RIBEIRA

Quality of joy: contemplative. Voice-kin: Bernardo Soares. Ribeira watches and attends. Ribeira's chapters (5 and 21) are marked by careful long cadences, a preference for interior registers, and the explicit thematization of attention itself. The cloud-body obscures Ribeira's face; the face is not withheld out of shame but out of a longstanding preference for public gaze without public exposure. Named for the Portuguese word for riverbank.

RIO

Quality of joy: disciplined, classical. Voice-kin: Ricardo Reis. Rio walks at a steady pace. Rio's chapters (9 and 22) are marked by a measured rhythm, a Horatian composure, and a philosophical commitment to duration. The speckled mustard body carries the trace of pollen from fields Rio has walked through. Named for the simple Portuguese word for river. Rio's first ancestor, by the author's invention, walked the Tagus in 1890; the pace has been passed down.

VIOLETA

Quality of joy: composed, glamorous, camp. Voice-kin: Violante de Cysneiros (Pessoa's rarely-developed feminine heteronym), with a softening of the name to Violeta. Violeta arrives rather than being present; Violeta frames rather than occupies. Violeta's chapters (12 and 23) are marked by carefully-timed entrances, direct self-description, and an unapologetic aesthetic of composure. The red lipstick is chosen, not worn. The yellow visor is functional and glamorous in equal measure. Violeta completes, for this novella, a gesture Pessoa made but did not finish.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Marina City Fiftieth Anniversary Committee, who commissioned this book. To the two hi-vis crews, east and south, whose real labor is honored in the chorus chapters; any errors in trade or rhythm are mine. To Dolores, whose real name I have kept and who gave permission for her story to appear. To Bea, who read the manuscript and corrected two factual errors and said the rest was fair. To Theodora for the use of her boat's name. To my partner, who has lived with the armada for three summers and never once asked me to stop. To the river, for carrying all of us. To Fernando Pessoa, whose voices I borrowed; may this book honor rather than diminish the original invention. And to the readers who have reached this page — the book is yours now; please do with it what the day would do, which is to keep going.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Surjan is a writer and image-maker based in Chicago. They are genderqueer non-binary and use they/them pronouns. Twenty-Four Hours Knitting is their first novella. Their previous work has appeared in small literary magazines and on the walls of a rotating cast of friends' apartments. They live within walking distance of Marina City and can often be found on the Riverwalk before dawn with a paper cup of coffee, watching for what the river has decided to become that morning.

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